

In Spite of All

by

Edith Staniforth



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IN SPITE OF ALL



"He had taken her hand and was just raising it to his lips."—
Page 52.

IN SPITE OF ALL

A NOVEL

BY
EDITH STANIFORTH



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TO
JOSEPHINE DILLON
IN REMEMBRANCE OF OUR OLD
FRIENDSHIP

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IN SPITE OF ALL

CHAPTER I

SISSY

UP in the North Countrie. Before us a wide sweep of rough grassy land, hilly and broken with stones. At our feet the salt waters of the Bay, running far into the land, and looking like a silvery lake in the sunshine. And beyond the blue chain of the Lake mountains, dreamy, misty, enchanting, like the entrance of fairyland, full of romantic possibilities and promises of stirring adventure. None of your trim, well-kept little southern places of thirty or forty acres: a vast property extending over hill and moorland, seashore and mountain, as far as the eye can reach. Four counties meet on the estate; behind us lie the

moors of Lancashire, on our right the Yorkshire hills. The house lies nestling in the hollow, sheltered from the keen winds, a long, low white house with a terrace in front on which peacocks pace to and fro, and pigeons flutter down from the dove-cote in the tower above. Joining on to the house is the chapel, surmounted by a cross, a pretty little building, but small and only intended for the use of the inhabitants of the Hall. The church is in the village, a handsome stone edifice, built and endowed by Mr. Wharton, to which the family repair every Sunday in order to set a good example to the congregation, which is composed almost exclusively of their tenants and personal dependants. The Squire makes it a rule to give all his farms to Catholics. The old Faith has almost died out in that corner of the country which once literally swarmed with Jacobites and Papists, but he is gradually, with much labor and trouble, establishing a sort of nucleus of Catholicism on his own estate. Beyond this he does not at-

tempt to go. He is no proselytizer and the parsons (always more liberal than their flocks), satisfied with not being interfered with in their parishes, look on at his proceedings with a tolerance that is almost indifference.

The front of the house is comparatively new, dating back only to the close of the last century, but the back is considerably older, a regular North Country house, built more for strength than beauty, with rough-hewn stones and small windows set wide apart. The rooms on this side of the house are low and small, leading out of long, low passages paneled in oak which the barbarous taste of a preceding age has painted green! On the walls hang the portraits of the family, with a curious likeness in name and feature. John and Charles succeed one another almost uninterruptedly. Among the women there is more variety, as occasionally a favorite female saint gives her name to one of the daughters of the house, but even here there is a tendency to run in grooves, and the re-

ligious taste of one generation differs very little from that of the previous one. A thoroughly conservative old family, keeping up the old Faith and the old traditions in their quiet corner of the world and taking very little heed of what went on outside. "Cecilia" recurs again and again in the family annals, and many a pretty face with that name smiles down from the walls, but none fairer than the Cecilia Wharton who stands, on this autumn afternoon, by the fire in the morning-room with a smile on her face and a happy light in her eyes.

She is about twenty years of age, with a pretty, rounded figure, brown eyes, bonny brown hair and a complexion that has won her the title of the Rose of Wharton. No beauty to set the world on fire, to drive men mad with love and longing, but a fresh, sweet, wholesome loveliness that rests the eye and contents the heart, a beauty that a man would be proud of in his wife or daughter, a beauty of the home and the firelight, to gladden one man's life and be the crown of

his possessions. She stands in a favorite attitude of hers, with her hands loosely interlaced, gazing into the fire, the flickering flame lighting up the shimmering folds of her blue silk dress and reflecting itself in her eyes. Presently the sound of carriage wheels is heard on the gravel. The girl's face flushes. She springs to the door, then changes her mind and slowly retraces her steps. The next moment the door opens and a handsome, broad-shouldered man enters the room.

"Sissy!" he said.

With an affected start the girl turned round.

"Dear me, Philip!" in a tone of surprise.

"Is that you?"

A look of mortification crossed his face.

"Didn't you expect me?"

"Well, I thought there was just a chance you might turn up."

"But I told you—and you don't seem very glad to see me."

"Indeed, my lord! Pray, what do you ex-

pect me to say? That my life has been a blank since I saw you last? That I was dreaming of you even now by the fire?"

In spite of her saucy words there was a very tender light in the eyes she upraised to his. His face cleared, and, stooping down, he kissed her fondly.

"I believe you were," he answered, laughing. "You little humbug, you quite took me in! I thought there was something the matter. Well, have the cousins arrived? And what are they like?"

"The most beautiful woman you ever saw in your life."

"Why, I thought there were two."

"Dear me, how literal you are!" exclaimed Sissy impatiently. "Of course there are two, but no one—no man, at any rate—would ever look at Mary when Eleanor was in the room."

"But you are not a man, Sissy."

"No," she said slowly, with so serious a consideration apparently of this self-evident fact that her lover could not refrain from a

smile. "But do you know, Philip, I think I have got something of a man's weak-mindedness about looks. I could sit and look for hours at a pretty face."

"Male or female?" he suggested maliciously.

She gave him a crushing look.

"Now that remark," she observed, "shows all the narrow-minded prejudice of your sex. You can never believe that one woman may honestly admire another. As a matter of fact, sir, we admire a beautiful woman far more than you do."

An incredulous "Oh!" broke from Philip's lips. But Sissy stuck to her point.

"Yes, we do. Mind, I don't say we are not jealous of her. But that is, after all, the highest compliment we can pay her, and the one she would appreciate most. To feel our danger is the strongest proof of our admiration."

"But you, Sissy darling, have no such danger to fear."

The girl's bright face clouded over.

"I think not. I hope not. Those whom I have loved most have always loved me best. And yet—I wonder if you love me, Philip, as much as I do you. Nothing, I know, could make me change toward you."

"And nothing could make *me* change toward *you*. Sissy, what are you thinking of?"

"Suppose," she said hesitatingly, taking up a corner of her dress and beginning to pleat it between her fingers "that I were to lose my looks—or that some more beautiful woman were to come in your way—"

"You think," interrupted Philip, starting up from the low seat he had taken by her side, "that I might transfer my affections to her? Thank you, Sissy. I am much obliged to you for your good opinion."

He turned away indignantly, but she followed him and laid her hand on his arm.

"Forgive me, Philip," she uttered pleadingly, "I did not mean to vex you."

Looking down he saw that her eyes were full of tears. His anger fled at the sight.

“You foolish child!” he exclaimed, taking her two hands in his. “See here, Sissy. When I first fell in love with you it was for your beauty—I do not deny it. You were the prettiest girl I had ever seen, and men are weak-minded, as you say. But I soon found out that your looks were the least part of you. It is you I love, not your beauty, and if you were to lose it all, everything that makes you outwardly so charming, you would still be my own Sissy, whom I love better than anything else in the world.”

The girl’s eyes were glistening again when he concluded, but this time with happy tears.

“Thank you, Philip,” she said simply. “I did not doubt you, and yet it is pleasant to hear it from your own lips. Good gracious!” starting. “There is the bell. I shall never be ready.”

She fled from the room. Philip lingered for a moment, gazing thoughtfully into the fire.

“Curious notion,” he muttered, “that of

Sissy's. I wonder what put it into her head. She is not often fanciful."

The next instant he raised his head with a light laugh.

" 'The most beautiful woman I ever saw.' Well, we shall see if I agree to that."

And he walked upstairs whistling:

"My love is like the red, red rose
That's newly blown in June;
My love is like the melody
That's sweetly played in tune."

Sissy heard him, and a warm, rosy flush overspread her cheek.

"Dear Philip!" she murmured. "How could I doubt him for a moment?"

CHAPTER II

MISS ROCHE

HALF an hour later Sir Philip Leigh emerged from his room dressed for dinner and nearly ran into a young lady who was coming out of the opposite doorway. Mutual apologies ensued, and the girl, crossing the passage, knocked at a door a little further down.

“Are you ready, Eleanor?”

“No. Go in first and say I’m coming.”

“But Eleanor—”

The door closed, and he heard no more.

“Apparently the beauty takes time to adorn herself,” thought Philip. “This is the sister, I suppose. She is not pretty, certainly, but I rather like her face.”

Sissy was waiting for him in the hall with a face from which every cloud had fled. She held in her hand a rosebud which she proceeded to pin on his coat in the most ap-

proved fashion. To do this she had to stand on tiptoe, for she was but a little thing, and Philip Leigh was unusually tall, six foot two in his stockings, and broad in proportion. They went into the drawing-room together. A beautiful old lady was sitting by the fire—beautiful still, in spite of her seventy years, with a complexion like a girl's and features of cameo-like regularity. Her hair was still brown and luxuriant, and on it she wore, instead of a cap, a sort of arrangement of black lace peculiarly suitable to the stately style of her looks. She held out her hand to Philip with a smile, but without rising. Evidently he was on a footing of intimacy that rendered such formalities unnecessary. An old gentleman stood with his back to the chimney-piece, his watch in his hand, which he consulted from time to time with evident irritation.

“Good evening, Leigh,” in response to Philip's greeting. “Pretty well, I thank you. Can you tell me, Sissy,” suddenly turning to his grand-daughter, “what those

girls are about? They have been here two good hours. Surely that is long enough for any woman to dress herself in. In my time it was considered extremely bad manners to keep your elders waiting."

"Quite right, grand," said a voice from the window, and a young man, the image of Sissy, as he might well be, seeing that he was her twin-brother, turned round. "Deuced bad form, I call it. If there's a thing I hate it's unpunctuality at meals. Upsets the whole house."

"I like that!" exclaimed Sissy, laughing. "How many times have you been late for breakfast this week?"

"Seen the beauty, Leigh?" inquired her brother without deigning to notice the question. "A ripper she is, and no mistake."

"Charlie!" said Mrs. Wharton in a tone of reproof.

"All right, granny—won't do it again. You see," he continued, addressing Philip, "I feel a bit responsible, for it was I who discovered her. Came across them last year in

Ireland just before the father died, and found out we were cousins. Third or fourth, I believe, but they think a lot of relatives in that country, and the poor old boy was tremendously good to me. So when he died, and they were left very badly off, I thought I couldn't do less than get granny to have them here. Quite disinterested on my part," shrugging his shoulders; "for, between you and me, the beauty can't abide me."

"I saw her sister, I think," remarked Philip, "just now on the stairs."

"Polly? She's not much," began the boy disparagingly, "as far as looks go, that is—though she's a good sort in her way."

"Hush!" uttered Sissy warningly. "Here they are."

A voice on the stairs, a rustle of silken garments, the door opened and the eldest Miss Roche, tall and stately, her low black dress setting off the dazzling fairness of her neck and shoulders, swept into the room, followed meekly by her sister.

It is not often that one comes across a per-

fectly beautiful woman. Pretty girls are as common in England as blackberries, but beauty, real, undeniable beauty, such as the ancients dreamed of and strove to set forth in their statues, is what a man sees, as a rule, but once in his lifetime. Such was Eleanor Roche's. Pale, golden hair drawn back from a low Grecian forehead, large, melting green eyes, over-shadowed by long black lashes, a classical outline, and a faultless mouth. Her figure was as perfect as her face—with one exception. Her hands were large, but white and well shaped, but her foot was her weak point—large, flat, and clumsy. She endeavored to conceal it by wearing her dresses very long, but with only partial success. No woman with a large foot is a graceful mover. It betrays itself in her walk, as though she were embarrassed by the weight she has to drag after her. Sissy's foot was like a fairy's, so light that it scarcely brushed the dew from the grass, and her hand was more beautiful still—a little soft, white hand with dimples instead of

knuckles, and a rosy palm. But, alas! poor Sissy! What were hand and foot and all her delicate nameless charms compared to that matchless beauty, to find a simile to which one had to go back to the days of old, to that

“Daughter of the gods, divinely tall
And most divinely fair.”

She went up to Mrs. Wharton and made her excuses with perfect self-possession; then, turning, she let her eyes travel round the assembled company. They rested for a moment on Sissy with instinctive aversion; then, passing on, encountered the direct, curious gaze of Sir Philip Leigh. For a full minute they stood gazing into each other's eyes, then Eleanor's dropped with a slow, subtle smile. She was satisfied.

“Miss Roche, Miss Mary Roche—our neighbor, Sir Philip Leigh,” introduced Mrs. Wharton. “John, will you take Eleanor in?”

The Squire offered his arm to his beautiful guest, already half-appeased. She devoted

herself, during dinner, to effacing in his mind the memory of her fault, and by the time they rose from the table he was completely subjugated. Yet she found time to shoot more than one magnetic glance from those wonderful green eyes at Sir Philip Leigh. For the first time since she had known him, Sissy found his attention strangely distracted. He told himself that he did not like the girl, that there was something objectionable and unfeminine in her bold, direct gaze, so different from Sissy's modest sweetness, yet his eyes kept wandering in her direction, fascinated in spite of himself by her marvelous beauty. Sissy noticed nothing. She was unsuspicious by nature, and the faint trouble caused by her first sight of Eleanor had been completely dissipated by Philip's words before dinner.

"Well?" she said, taking him to one side on their return to the drawing-room. "Was I not right? Is she not beautiful?"

"She is. But I prefer your face, Sissy, a thousand times."

He spoke with a warmth intended to convince himself as well as her. Sissy burst out laughing, and made him a low courtesy.

“Thank you, sir. I hope so, indeed, considering all things! But seriously, Philip, though it is nice of you to say so, I am afraid very few people would agree with you. She puts me out.”

It was true. Beside her magnificent cousin, Sissy faded into insignificance as a candle is extinguished by the sun. Her lovely bloom looked commonplace beside that clear, transparent pallor into which a delicate color would come when she was flushed or excited, like the light shining through a shell. To those who knew Sissy well, there was a beauty of the soul in her face transcending all mere external charms, but men are little apt to look below the surface.

“You must be tired, my dear,” said Mrs. Wharton, taking a chair by Eleanor’s side, “after your long journey. We have prayers

at half-past nine—so as not to keep the servants up, you know—and after that I should advise you to go to bed.”

“Oh! thank you, Mrs. Wharton, but I am not at all tired.”

“Did you have a good crossing?”

“Very bad, I believe, but I am a good sailor. I never mind the weather. Mary was very ill.”

Mary looked it. Her face was green, and it was with an evident effort that she responded to Charlie’s attempts to entertain her.

“Now, then,” said the Squire, rubbing his hands. “Who’s for a rubber of whist? Miss Eleanor, may I have the honor of having you for my partner?”

“I should be delighted, Mr. Wharton,” she answered sweetly, “but I can not play. Mary does.”

“Mary shall not—not to-night, at any rate,” exclaimed Sissy, a little indignantly. “She is far too tired. I shall be your partner, grandpa, if you will have me.”

"Come along, then. Leigh, do you take a hand?"

"Not to-night, sir, thank you."

"Then, Charlie, you'll play with your grandmother; and be good enough to remember, sir, that you are playing whist, and not skittles."

"Certainly, sir," responded that young man gravely, executing a prodigious wink for his sister's benefit—which, however, passed unheeded. With a curious little pang at her heart Sissy watched Philip rise from his own seat and take one beside Eleanor, where he speedily became engrossed in a low-toned conversation, only an occasional word of which reached her ears. The color faded a little from her cheek. She applied herself to the game, but so listlessly, with such evident abstraction, as to provoke more than one impatient remark from her grandfather. What was it? Only a trifle, after all, but for lovers there are no trifles. He had preferred talking to Eleanor to playing with her.

"I say, Sis," whispered her brother, taking advantage of a pause in the game, "I wouldn't allow that if I were you."

"What?" exclaimed Sissy, starting.

He jerked his thumb significantly over his shoulder.

"You keep your eye on her. She's a deep one, and will cut the ground from under your feet before you know where you are. I've seen her little games before now."

"Charles!" cried his grandfather angrily, bringing his hand down on the table. "Do you mean to attend to the game, or do you not?"

"Beg pardon, sir, I'm sure," said the boy penitently. "I only wanted to say a word to Sissy."

And for the rest of the game he behaved in the most exemplary manner; which was more than could be said of his sister, who made mistake after mistake, until at last the old Squire fairly lost patience and flung down his cards.

"It is impossible to play with you to-night,

Sissy. What is the matter with you?"

"I don't know, grandpa. I suppose I'm tired. I'm very sorry."

There was a quiver in her voice as of unshed tears. Philip looked up; and the Squire, whose temper, if hot, was soon over, melted immediately. His grand-daughter was dear to him as the apple of his eye, and he could not bear the sight of her distress—though, if he had known the truth, he had very little to do with it.

"There, there, child; there is nothing to cry about. We have all been young once. Your thoughts were wool-gathering, I expect," with a good-humored glance at Philip, who had risen from his seat and come to Sissy's side.

"Gooseberry-picking, more likely," muttered Charlie under his breath.

"And in good time there comes the bell," said Mrs. Wharton. "Philip, do you care to join in our prayers?"

"Certainly, Mrs. Wharton. I shall be most happy."

Miss Roche turned round and looked at him in surprise.

“Are you not a Catholic, then?” she inquired.

“No,” answered the young man, with rather an embarrassed laugh. “But I have no prejudices. And”—with a sudden impulse, turning to his betrothed—“where Sissy goes I am content to follow.”

Sissy shot him a swift, grateful look. Eleanor smiled rather ironically.

“That sentiment may lead you far,” she observed, and followed Mrs. Wharton from the room.

CHAPTER III

SUNDAY AT WHARTON

THE Squire read prayers in patriarchal fashion, with his household gathered around him. Sissy knelt absorbed in recollection, conscious indeed of Philip's presence by her side, but the consciousness only lending a deeper fervor to the prayers she uttered on his account. As they came out of the chapel Mrs. Wharton held out her hand.

"Good night, my dears," kissing both her guests. "Sissy, take your cousins upstairs, and see that they have all they want."

Sissy obeyed. She stood for a few minutes chatting in Eleanor's room, then left them, promising to send her maid. As she closed the door she breathed a sigh of relief. There was something baleful in the glance of the green-eyed enchantress, beautiful as she was, and Sissy, her hospitable instincts satisfied, was glad to make her escape. She came

along the passage deep in thought, and started violently as a hand was laid on her arm.

"Philip! How you frightened me! I did not see you."

"I am so sorry. Sissy," lowering his voice, "what upset you to-night?"

She hesitated.

"You will think me very silly," she murmured at last.

"Perhaps," he answered, smiling, "but I should like to hear."

"I thought you seemed to prefer Eleanor's company to mine."

There was a moment's silence. Perhaps he was a little conscience-stricken. Then:

"Sissy," he said, "you must promise me never to think such a thing again."

"It was not true, then?" eagerly looking up.

"True that I did not want to play whist. I was tired, and the Squire is a martinet, as we know. But as for preferring anything or any one to you—why, Sissy, I care more

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for your little finger than all the rest of the world put together!"

Sissy was comforted. She went to bed with a light heart and no foreboding of evil to come, no warning that even while Philip's words dispelled her anxiety, a plot was being laid against her peace.

Eleanor was standing in front of the glass, her magnificent hair unbound and falling far below her waist. Holding a candle above her head, she surveyed every line and feature of her face with calm deliberation. The result seemed satisfactory. She put down the candle and turned round.

"You can sleep here, Mary, if you like," she remarked. "This great four-poster is enough to give one the horrors all by one's self. But you'll dress in your own room."

"Very well," answered Mary, meekly. "It was rather nice of them, wasn't it, to give us a room apiece?"

"I dare say they have more than they know what to do with," said Eleanor, indifferently.

“What did you think of Sir Philip Leigh?”

Eleanor smiled—a confident, superior smile.

“I mean to marry him.”

“Eleanor!” cried Mary, horrified. “He is engaged to Sissy.”

“That makes it all the more interesting. Don’t be a fool, Mary. If I don’t look out for myself, who do you suppose is going to do so for me? You are cut out for an old maid, but I intend to marry if I can, and I am not likely to meet with a better chance. I am twenty-five, and I have no time to lose.”

“But to take him away from Sissy, who has been so kind to us!” sighed Mary.

Eleanor deigned no reply. She dropped asleep directly her head touched her pillow, and slept as those sleep who have neither heart nor conscience; a dreamless sleep, calm as an infant’s. But Mary lay awake far into the night, in spite of her fatigue, pondering how she could counteract her sister’s treachery. It seemed such an ignoble re-

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turn for the hospitality they had received.

Charlie and Sissy were the children of Captain Wharton, the only son of Mr. and Mrs. Wharton, who had been killed in a frontier engagement out in India. The news of his death was brought to his wife, who had remained behind in England, awaiting the birth of her third child. The shock proved fatal to both mother and infant, and the twins, themselves scarcely more than babies, were brought to Wharton, where the bereaved and heart-broken parents were forced to lay aside their own grief and try to make a cheerful home for the two poor scared little creatures, clad in deep mourning, who clung to each other and went about hand in hand, refusing to be separated. They grew up united by the tie of a more than common affection. If one got into trouble, the other insisted on sharing the punishment, and it was no uncommon thing to come into the room and find both standing in the same corner—"because," as the innocent one would

gravely remark, "my twin was punished, so I came in, too."

Theirs was a lonely enough position. Their father was an only child, and on their mother's side there was only an unknown uncle who had gone out to South America just before her marriage, and might be dead, for all any one knew to the contrary. It would be difficult to say which their grandfather and grandmother loved best. Charlie was their pride, but Sissy was the daughter of their old age, the help and comfort of their declining years. She came out at eighteen, and they watched her successes with a mixture of pride and trembling, dreading lest any one should rob them of their darling. But though she had plenty of admirers, not one of them seemed to touch her heart until, at a ball in the neighborhood about six months before, she met Sir Philip Leigh, who had just returned from abroad. The attraction was mutual. They fell in love at first sight, and Mr. and Mrs. Wharton were forced to console themselves with the reflec-

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tion that Langton Hall, Sir Philip's place, was only eight miles off, and that Sissy would at any rate be settled near them. But they exacted a year's delay. Even the convent, they said, allowed a year's novitiate, and Sissy was still very young to know her own mind. Besides it would give them time to get accustomed to the idea of doing without her.

Sir Philip submitted, though sorely against the grain. They had been engaged six months, and each day only seemed to bring to light some fresh beauty in the character of his betrothed. Sissy was modest and retiring, she did not surrender herself immediately, but those who knew her best loved her most. Like a sensitive plant she expanded in the sunshine of affection, but shrank into herself at the least touch of coldness or distrust. She had known but little of either in her happy life.

The next day was Sunday. Sissy came down dressed for church in a violet dress and a pretty little violet velvet toque.

"Which will you do, my dear?" said Mrs. Wharton to Eleanor. "Walk or drive?"

"Drive, if you please," returned Miss Roche, who never walked if she could help it.

Mary looked relieved. Sissy was going to walk with her brother and Sir Philip Leigh. Perhaps Eleanor had repented her intention of the night before. She knew very little of her sister, after all. Eleanor had all the self-confidence of a great general; she could afford to waste an opportunity which was more apparent than real. Charlie would have been her escort, not Philip, and her refusal to walk would throw dust in the old lady's eyes and in Sissy's, too.

Relieved from her enemy's presence, Sissy's spirits rose. She had been rather silent during breakfast, but now she rippled over with merriment, her pretty silvery laugh ringing out on the clear air. Philip, looking at her sweet speedwell face, reproached himself for having caused her a moment's trouble.

"I saw an old admirer of yours yesterday, Sissy," he said presently.

"Of mine? Who was it?"

"Bernard Maxwell."

Sissy looked grave.

"Poor Bernard!" she said with a sigh. "Ah! Philip, you have a great deal to answer for."

"Would you have married him, Sissy, if I hadn't turned up?"

"Perhaps. I can't say. I can not imagine now what it would be like to marry any one but you."

They reached the church. The Squire rode up, as they appeared, on a steady old cob which had carried him many years. The churchyard was full of people, with whom Sissy interchanged friendly salutations as she walked up the path followed by her intended husband. It was customary to wait till the Squire's party had taken their places before entering the church. The family pew was raised on a sort of dais overlooking the congregation, so that Mrs. Wharton could

see at a glance who was absent. The organ was on the same platform.

This was Sissy's peculiar province. She made her way toward it now, surrounded by a little flock of school-children, whom her exertions had trained into a tolerably efficient choir. As she mounted the steps her dress brushed against a young man of soldierly aspect, at sight of whom Sissy's color deepened a little. He bowed gravely, and she responded by a hurried salutation without looking up.

The congregation trooped into the church with an awkward reverence to the Squire's pew as they passed. As Mass began, the coachman came with Mrs. Wharton's fur cloak, which he laid on the door of the pew and took up his post beside it, like a sentinel on duty, only kneeling when the service required it. It was like a little kingdom. Every man, woman, and child was personally known to Mrs. Wharton, and most of them had received at one time or another substantial help at her hands. And as she

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opened her prayer-book her eyes traveled round the church, noting one poor woman in mourning, another in deep distress, with a mental memorandum for future assistance.

The young man to whom Sissy had bowed joined them as they came out. He was an old friend, evidently. Charlie greeted him with delight.

"Why, Maxwell, old fellow, I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw you in church. What brings you here?"

"Our regiment has just been moved to L—."

"How are you, Maxwell?" said the Squire. "You are coming back to luncheon, of course."

"Thank you, sir, I shall be delighted. How do you do, Miss Wharton?" as Sissy approached.

She gave him her hand with a little embarrassment. Sissy's tender heart always smote her when she knew she had given pain, however unintentionally; and in this case her conscience was not quite clear. For she had

encouraged Maxwell, had even thought she might come, in time, to love him, till Philip appeared on the scene, and with the first call her heart surrendered.

"The carriage is waiting, my dear," said Mrs. Wharton, addressing Eleanor. "Will you get in?"

"I think I will walk back, Mrs. Wharton, if you don't mind," said Eleanor sweetly. "The wind was so cold coming."

So the walking party set out, Maxwell taking up his position by Sissy's side, and Charlie sticking close to his friend, and talking eagerly all the time. It seemed only natural that Eleanor, whose walking powers were confessedly not great, should drop behind with Sir Philip Leigh.

"An unsuccessful rival?" inquired Miss Roche presently, with a smile, glancing at the group ahead of them. "You are generous, Sir Philip."

"I can afford to be."

"But, tell me, is he not a Catholic? Would it not have been a more suitable match?"

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"I suppose it would," answered Philip, laughing. "But, you see, Miss Roche, Sissy happened to prefer me."

"I can understand that," said Eleanor softly, raising her eyes to his face, and Philip felt a thrill shoot through him, half of pleasure, half of alarm.

At this moment Sissy looked round. A shade of uneasiness flitted across her face. She slackened her steps, and let them come up.

"I forgot to perform the introduction," she said. "Captain Maxwell, my cousin, Miss Roche."

Both bowed, exchanging a long, keen glance. Eleanor's eyes fell first with a sense of dislike and disquiet. Here was a man, she felt, over whom her beauty had no power, and she hated him accordingly. That grave, earnest face, those penetrating eyes, were more than a match for her wiles.

"A bad 'un," muttered Maxwell to himself as he turned away. And he took an

early opportunity of asking Sissy how long her cousin was going to stay.

"A month, I think. Why?" struck by his manner. "Don't you like her?"

"I don't trust her," said Maxwell briefly.

"Nor I," uttered Sissy under her breath; and then, ashamed of having said so much, she moved abruptly away. She laid herself out all that day to be as kind and pleasant as possible to Eleanor. Miss Roche watched her efforts with wondering contempt.

"What is she up to now?" she thought. "I know she doesn't like me. I suppose she has been abusing me to Captain Maxwell, and this is a fit of pious remorse."

But she received her cousin's advances graciously enough. It was not part of her policy to quarrel with Sissy.

CHAPTER IV

THE CLOUDS BEGIN TO GATHER

SISSY was alone in her room. She had gone up under pretense of a headache, and was sitting gazing idly into the fire, her heart torn with a thousand vague suspicions too slight to put into words. There was something going on in the house which she did not understand. Philip was outwardly as kind and attentive as ever, yet she felt intuitively that there was a difference. He scarcely spoke to Eleanor in her presence, but more than once she had intercepted a glance of mutual understanding which filled her with an uneasiness she could not define. Her face had lost much of the brightness it wore when we first beheld her, and she sighed once or twice—a sigh that told of a burdened heart.

A knock at the door.

"Come in," said Sissy, without looking round.

She supposed it to be one of the servants.

"May I come in, Sissy?"

It was Mary's voice. Sissy started, and a flush of annoyance rose to her cheek. Even in her own room could she not be left in peace? But her habitual courtesy prevailed.

"Come in, Mary," she answered.

And, rising, she opened the door. Mary entered. She looked around with pleased curiosity.

"So this is your room, Sissy? How pretty it is!"

"Haven't you seen it before?" asked Sissy, exerting herself to do the honors to her unwished-for guest. "This is my little sitting-room. It used to be my school-room. The bedroom is beyond."

She opened the door between. Mary peeped in. It was a dainty little nest, a maiden's bower, with all sorts of pretty things scattered about, Christmas and birth-

day gifts of many succeeding years, some of the dearest of all of little intrinsic value.

"This is the old part of the house," Sissy explained. "I like it the best. The rooms are small, but they are so quaint and old-fashioned. I love that old window recess. On a fine day you can see right out to sea and the ships passing across the bay."

Mary looked and admired, and envied perhaps a little. She had little experience of a life so sheltered and cared for. Her own had been a struggle with poverty from childhood upward—poverty and a millstone of debt. Yet there were things, after all, that money could not buy, and what was the good of a happy past if it did not insure the future? She sat down at last, to Sissy's disappointment. She had hoped that, her curiosity satisfied, Mary would depart. Perhaps if Sissy left off talking she would take the hint, and go. She answered, therefore, in monosyllables. The conversation languished, finally dropped. Still Mary remained. She had an object in coming, and

was trying to nerve herself to broach her errand. Sissy leaned back in her chair and lost herself in her own thoughts. Her eyes were half-closed and her face wore a weary, listless expression. Mary took note of it, and her heart filled with compassion. She bent forward and touched her cousin's hand.

"Sissy," she said, "you are unhappy."

Sissy looked up; her pride came to her aid.

"Why should you think so, Mary? Have I not everything to make me happy?"

"Everything. And yet, Sissy, you are unhappy, and it is Eleanor's fault."

Sissy turned away her head. It was too true. She could not deny it.

"O Sissy!" cried her cousin, kneeling down now by her side, "do you think I have not seen it? You have fought against the knowledge, you have tried to close your eyes. And all the time it is like a canker eating into your heart."

Sissy was silent.

"Again and again," Mary continued, "I have wanted to warn you. But what was I

to say? She is my sister. Even now what must you think of me, to be accusing my own flesh and blood? But I can bear it no longer. You have been so good to us. I can not stand by and see you tricked and deceived. Do you know that she meets Sir Philip Leigh every day in the conservatory when your back is turned? Do you know that she slips out to see him every morning in the garden before breakfast? That she leaves notes for him in her music—the music that she hands him before your very eyes?”

Sissy sighed. That very morning her maid had come to her with similar tales. It was all over the servants' hall that Miss Roche was setting her cap at Sir Philip Leigh, and the servants, one and all, were up in arms and ready to do battle on their young mistress' behalf.

“And if it is so, Mary,” she answered wearily, “what can I do? If my love can not keep him, what else remains to me?”

“It is not him, it is her!” cried Mary, with an energetic disregard of grammar. “You

don't know her. He is a tool in her hands."

Sissy winced. It was small consolation to hear her Philip, the hero of her girlish dreams, spoken of as the tool of an unprincipled, designing woman! Was he indeed so weak and his love for her so slight?

"You are no match for her," continued Mary, quite unconscious of having given offense. "You are too generous, too unsuspecting. Fight her with her own weapons. Half measures are no use with Eleanor. Show her that you have found her out. Tell her that you will not endure it—that he belongs to you—and that she must either change her ways or leave the house."

In spite of her sadness, Sissy could scarcely forbear a smile. Yet the counsel was not altogether displeasing to her. Anything was better than fighting in the dark.

"Thank you, Mary," she said, kissing her. "I will think over what you say."

The tone was a dismissal. Mary rose, and left the room. And Sissy stood gazing into the fire in her favorite attitude, her head

bent, her hands loosely clasped together. When she looked up again, the listless expression had disappeared. Her resolution was taken. She would tax her enemy with her perfidy face to face and abide the result.

Her spirits rose at the prospect of doing battle. She came downstairs, her face looking brighter than it had done for days, and, crossing the hall, opened the library door. What she saw there nearly banished her new-found courage. Philip and Eleanor were standing by the fireplace; he had taken her hand, and was just raising it to his lips. They started guiltily apart at her entrance. Philip walked over to the window and stood there, looking out, trying to appear unconcerned. Sissy turned rather pale; she put her hand unconsciously to her heart, from which the blood seemed suddenly to have ebbed away. Nevertheless, she walked up to Eleanor with a steady step.

"I want to speak to you," she said. "Can you give me a few minutes alone?"

"Will it not do by-and-by?" asked

Eleanor. "Sir Philip has just asked me to play a game of chess."

Her tone was almost insolent. Sissy flushed up.

"Sir Philip must wait my convenience for once," she said haughtily. "I shall not detain you long."

Her manner showed that she was not to be trifled with. Eleanor shrugged her shoulders and rose, casting a glance of mock resignation at Sir Philip Leigh. He started angrily forward.

"What does this mean, Sissy?" he demanded. "Is it on my account that you show discourtesy to your guest?"

Sissy looked at him with eyes full of anguish. Never before had he said an unkind word to her. And it was to Eleanor she owed it! But she stood her ground.

"This is a question between Eleanor and me, Philip," she said gently. "You have nothing to do with it. May I ask you to leave us alone?"

He had no choice but to comply. As the

door closed behind him, Sissy looked up and caught her rival watching her with an ironical smile. The sight brought back her courage.

"I have been told," she began, "that you are in the habit of making clandestine appointments with Sir Philip Leigh. Is this true?"

"You have been listening to servants' tales, I suppose," said Miss Roche scornfully. "I thought you were above it."

Sissy colored.

"We look upon our servants as friends. But that has nothing to do with it. Can you deny it?"

Eleanor laughed.

"What good would it do to deny it? You would not believe me."

"No," said Sissy, drawing a deep breath. "You are right. I should not believe you."

"That I have made myself pleasant to Sir Philip Leigh is perfectly true. He seemed dull, and I took compassion on him. But—

I am sorry if it hurts your feelings—I must say that he met me more than half way.”

“It is not true!” cried Sissy passionately. “You have led him on with your beauty and your false, flattering ways, but in his heart he is true to me.”

“You think so?” returned Eleanor, with a slight smile.

Sissy was stung to the quick. She made a step forward, then recollected herself and turned away, clasping her hands tightly in the effort to control her emotion. Eleanor’s eyes followed her with an expression of triumph. After a minute or two, Sissy turned round. Her face was composed, but very pale.

“I do not choose,” she said, “to prolong this discussion any longer. It is insulting both to Sir Philip and myself. But I wish you to hear my decision. Either you give up these underhand ways, which threaten my happiness, and cease to hold communication with Sir Philip Leigh except with my knowledge and consent, or—”

"Or?" repeated Eleanor as Sissy paused.

"I shall be forced to ask you to leave the house."

This was turning the tables with a vengeance. Eleanor was staggered. She had never anticipated this. Like many of her stamp, she had fallen into the error of mistaking gentleness for want of courage. She felt very much as if a dove had flown in her face.

"This is strange language," she said slowly at last, "to use to a guest."

"No stranger than your behavior. I am sick of it," cried Sissy, with a sudden passion. "Do you think I am a stick, or a stone, to go on day after day seeing you steal away his love for me, and make no sign? I will bear it no longer. Accept my conditions or go."

Eleanor was completely borne down by her vehemence. To do her justice, she bore Sissy no ill-will for it. On the contrary, she rather admired her—from a purely dispassionate point of view. She had not thought it was in her to show so much fight. But the

meekest animal will turn if it is brought to bay.

It was a serious obstacle to her plans. A few more days, and she could have defied them all. But not yet. She must temporize.

"I accept," she said at last, looking up, "since there is no help for it. But, mind, I can only answer for myself. I can not control *his* feelings."

"I understand," returned Sissy, biting her lip as she felt the implied taunt. "It is all I ask."

CHAPTER V

THE PLOT THICKENS

POOR Sissy! her victory was dearly bought. Philip held aloof from her the whole evening, and devoted himself openly to her rival. The reproaches of his conscience only embittered him—those who are in the wrong are always the least ready to forgive. Eleanor's conduct was irreproachable; she suffered rather than permitted his attentions, with a deprecating glance at Sissy that seemed to say: "You see, it is not my fault. I hold off, and he seeks me the more." Sissy grew paler and paler as the hours wore on, her eyes followed Philip about with an unconsciously imploring expression. But he took no notice. His heart was full of anger against her.

"What is the matter, Sis?" asked her brother, sitting down beside her.

"I am tired," she answered, with an effort.

Her grandmother looked up. The eyes of the old are unobservant; she had not even noticed the little drama that was being enacted before her eyes.

"Why don't you go to bed, my darling?" she asked. "I am sure your cousins will excuse you."

Sissy shook her head. She would see the play out to the end. Perhaps Philip would change. He could not surely part from her that night in anger. But Philip showed no signs of relenting. He hung over Eleanor's chair and seemed to have eyes for no one else but her. His face was flushed, and there was an obstinate look about the corners of his mouth—a weak mouth for all its beauty. Charlie watched him with growing indignation.

"I should like to give you a piece of my mind, my fine fellow!" he muttered. "Pity Sissy didn't take Maxwell. He's worth a dozen of you."

At last Mrs. Wharton rose. Sissy gave

a sigh of relief. She hurried out into the hall, hoping to get a word with Philip alone. But he did not give her a chance. He took up a lighted candle. Sissy stretched out her hand for it. Perhaps he did not see the timid little movement; he turned his back on her, and gave it to Eleanor. This was the last straw. Sissy gave a gasp. The day had been a hard one. She was tired and overwrought. A mist swam before her eyes, and she fainted away.

When she recovered her senses she was lying on the drawing-room sofa with Philip kneeling beside her, his face full of remorse and concern. He had been just in time to catch her as she fell, and, lifting her in his arms, had carried her into the room.

"Sissy," he whispered, "was it my fault? Did I make you faint?"

She opened her eyes; they rested on his face with an expression of such tender, forgiving love, that the tears sprang to his own.

"I am a brute!" he exclaimed. "Sissy, can you forgive me?"

For all answer she held out her hand. He pressed it to his lips.

"How is she now?" asked Mrs. Wharton anxiously, coming up. "Sissy, child, what was the matter?"

"Nothing, granny. Only my stupidity," answered Sissy, looking up with a bright face. And she tried to rise, but her limbs trembled under her, and she was forced to accept Philip's arm. He conducted her to the door of her room, and parted from her there with a long, tender kiss and a lingering pressure of the hand.

For a few days all went well. Philip had never been kinder. He strove to anticipate her every wish. About the middle of the week he went back to Langton, and Sissy breathed a sigh of relief as he drove away. For once she saw him depart without regret. Eleanor's stay was drawing to a close—another week and she would be gone, and things would go back to what they had been before. Meanwhile, she was glad to know that he was out of reach of the spells of the enchant-

ress. Her spirits rose, and she went singing about the house with so blithe a face that her grandmother kissed her, and told her she was a very sunbeam. Only now did she realize the strain her spirits had endured.

Langton Hall lay in the valley, a finer estate than Wharton, but lacking its beautiful view. The house itself stood on a little eminence with a terrace in front, a common feature in North Country houses. A river ran through the grounds, beside which sheep grazed, a curious breed with black faces and double horns, and a wonderfully white fleecy wool. Mountain sheep they called them. It was a fine old mansion built of white stone with oriel windows and a castellated front. The stables contained accommodations for over forty horses; they joined on to the house, making the long line of buildings look almost palatial. Inside, the rooms were spacious and lofty; there were no very old rooms, as at Wharton, but the house was old enough to contain some very fine wood-carving of the Elizabethan period, most of it con-

fined, however, to the morning-room and the hall. The reception-rooms all opened out of one long passage, and communicated with one another, so that on the rare occasions when a ball was given at Langton the whole suite was thrown open with a magnificent effect. There were some fine pictures in the dining-room, family portraits with the signature of more than one distinguished artist, and all of them works of merit—with one exception—the portrait of a lady in a scarlet dress which hung over the mantelpiece, and the original of which was supposed to haunt the house. It was a wretched daub, and would have been taken down long ago but for a superstition which no Leigh had as yet found courage to overcome, a tradition in the family that if it were removed misfortune was sure to follow. The subject was never referred to in Lady Leigh's presence. Nothing annoyed her so much as any suggestion that the house was haunted. She did not herself believe in ghosts, but it made her guests nervous and uncomfortable, she

said, and one unfortunate man who happened to start a discussion on the subject at a dinner-party was never asked to the house again.

Philip came down to breakfast the morning after his return and found his mother waiting for him in the dining-room, a majestic-looking lady with an aristocratic, haughty face, every inch a *châtelaine*. They exchanged their usual morning greeting, and Philip unlocked the letter-bag while Lady Leigh began pouring out the tea.

"A whole pile for you, mother," he remarked, tossing her over a bundle of letters, most of them not of a very interesting appearance.

"Bills, I suppose. They always come in about Michaelmas."

Philip made no reply. He was turning over his own letters. Presently he came across one addressed in the bold, dashing hand which women affect nowadays, at sight of which he changed color, and looked round hastily to see if his mother were watching.

She was absorbed in her own correspondence, and, shoving it into his pocket for future perusal, he began drinking his tea.

"A letter from Sissy," observed Lady Leigh, presently looking up. "I suppose you have got one, too."

"Yes."

"What sort of girls are those cousins they have staying with them?"

"Very good-looking—one of them at least."

"As pretty as Sissy?"

"My dear mother," said Philip impatiently, "pretty is not a word to apply to Eleanor Roche. Sissy is pretty. Miss Roche is beautiful."

Lady Leigh pricked up her ears.

"Since when have you ceased to think Sissy beautiful, Philip?" she asked sharply. "To my mind hers is one of the sweetest faces I have ever seen."

"The sweetest face and the sweetest girl in all the world," answered Philip warmly. "But not beautiful, mother. Beautiful

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is too stately a word for our little Sissy."

Lady Leigh was only half satisfied. There was something under this which she did not understand. She determined to sift the matter to the bottom.

"Ought we not to ask them to dinner, or something?" she asked, after a pause.

Philip looked up.

"I wish you would, mother," he said eagerly. "And I'll get Maxwell over from Larchester to meet them. He'll be delighted to come—he's an old flame of Sissy's, you know," laughing.

Lady Leigh felt more and more disturbed. Why should her son wish to invite a former admirer of Sissy's to the house? Was it in order to distract her attention from something he did not wish her to see?

"Well," she said, rising, "I will go and write the note at once, and send it over. Once I get them together under my own eye," she added mentally, "I can judge for

myself. To-morrow will suit you, Philip, I suppose?" aloud.

"Perfectly. I will ride over to Larchester this afternoon, and ask Maxwell."

Lady Leigh left the room. Her son looked round, to make sure she was gone, then drew the note from his pocket. It was from Eleanor Roche.

"I am very unhappy," it began. "I have been insulted—grossly insulted—on your account. Will you abandon me, or will you be my friend, as you have so often sworn?"

"ELEANOR."

"P. S.—If you answer this note, get some one else to address the letter. The sight of your handwriting would expose me to fresh suspicions."

The blood rushed to Philip's face. He crumpled up the letter, and threw it into the fire. Unhappy! Insulted! By whom? Not by Sissy, surely! And on his account? All his manhood rose up in arms at the idea. His conduct had been weak and unworthy,

but he could not allow a woman to bear the blame when he had been in fault. This must be set right at once. He made a step toward the writing-table in the window. He paused. She was coming to-morrow. It would be better to wait till then, and he would be saved the necessity of resorting to the expedient she recommended, and from which his pride revolted.

He threw himself into a chair. Since the night he had held Sissy unconscious in his arms, the thought of her often recurred to his mind, accompanied by remorse. Poor little Sissy! how well she loved him. That was the sort of wife to marry, a tender, clinging little creature, who would look up to him and worship him, not a beauty with whom every man would fall in love. And yet—he checked the disloyal thought.

Sissy was alone in her room when Lady Leigh's note was brought to her. She read it with a face that grew more and more troubled as she reached the end.

"DEAREST SISSY," the letter ran—

"Will you and Miss Roche come over to-morrow to dine and sleep? And bring Charlie with you if he is disengaged.

"Ever yr. affecte,

"DOROTHY LEIGH.

"P. S.—I am very anxious to see your cousin. Philip tells me she is beautiful."

What did it mean? Had Philip prompted the invitation? Sissy felt her heart grow cold at the thought. And why was Mary not included in it? The post-script, she felt, conveyed a warning. A warm affection existed between Sissy and her mother-in-law to be. The engagement had met with Lady Leigh's entire approval. She was not demonstrative, and had never been on such terms with her son as to feel, with the keenness some mothers would, his preference for another woman. Sissy's sweetness had won her from the first with the attraction of a cold, self-contained nature to one directly its opposite. Sissy indeed

could never understand why people called Lady Leigh cold. She had treated Sissy like a daughter always, and the girl felt now that if anything threatened her happiness Lady Leigh, at any rate, would be on her side. The thought did something to allay her disquiet. She sat down and wrote her acceptance. It was impossible indeed to do otherwise. What valid excuse could she make?

There was no lack of warmth in Philip's greeting of his betrothed on the following day, but his eyes wandered beyond her to where Eleanor was standing by his mother's side. Miss Roche looked dazzlingly beautiful. She wore a large Gainsborough hat, which cast a most becoming shade over her fair face, and her cheeks were aglow with the fresh, frosty air. Frosts begin early in the North, and the trees and bushes were still white with the morning's rime.

Lady Leigh kissed Sissy affectionately, and took her up herself to her room, leaving

Eleanor to the housekeeper's care. It was a pretty room, set apart expressly for Sissy's use. A fire burned brightly on the hearth. Sissy took off her things and laid them on the bed; then, coming back, knelt down by the elder lady's side and took possession of her hand. Lady Leigh looked up.

"Sissy," she said abruptly, "why do you have that girl? I don't like her at all."

"No more do I," answered Sissy frankly. It was a relief to speak out to Philip's mother, who would so shortly become her own.

"Why don't you get rid of her?"

"She is going away next week."

"I wish it were to-morrow. She is a serpent, Sissy—a venomous snake—that would sting the hand that feeds it."

"But, mother," objected Sissy—she often gave Lady Leigh that title when they were alone—"how can you tell? You have scarcely seen her."

"I have seen others like her. I know her

type well. My poor little Sissy," taking the girl's face in her two hands and kissing it fondly, "you are no match for her."

Mary's very words! Sissy felt herself turning pale.

"You have some reason—" she began.

"No, no, my child, no reason," said Lady Leigh hastily, rising from her seat. "Only forewarned is forearmed, you know. Let us go down to tea."

CHAPTER VI

THE SCARLET LADY

THERE was a little commotion in the hall. Some one had just arrived, and they heard Charlie's voice exclaiming:

"Hello, Maxwell! I didn't know we were to have the honor of meeting you."

"Ah! I had the advantage of you," answered Maxwell. "I knew the treat that was in store for me."

"Captain Maxwell!" said Sissy. "This is a surprise."

"A pleasant one, I hope?" said Maxwell, smiling.

Sissy made no reply. It is doubtful indeed if she heard him. She was looking round, in search of Philip. Her color changed a little when she caught sight of him; he was seated in a corner by Eleanor's

side, to which he had returned after greeting his guest. Lady Leigh had followed the direction of Sissy's glance. She was a woman of the world, and fertile in expedients. Walking straight up to them, she obliged Philip to rise from his seat and offer it to his mother. She took it. Eleanor greeted her with a smile, but with rage in her heart.

"Sissy," said Lady Leigh, "will you make tea? I always hand over that duty to Sissy when she is here," she explained to Eleanor. "She is a dear girl. I shall gain a daughter without losing a son."

Eleanor assented sweetly. Inwardly she was thinking, "I suppose that was meant for a hit at me. She suspects me, I can see, but I think I am equal to her."

Tea was brought into the hall, where it was usually served at this time of the year. It was convenient for the men coming in from shooting, who lounged about without feeling their knickerbockers and gaiters out of place. An inner hall, shut off by doors and curtains, it was, to all intents and pur-

poses, a room, and was used as such. A gallery ran round above, on to which the bedrooms opened. This was a drawback sometimes to those who were sitting below.

Sissy did the honors of the tea-table very prettily. She was never seen to more advantage than in the discharge of these little household duties. She dispensed her cups, remembering every one's tastes, and the young men gathered round her, almost deserting Eleanor and Lady Leigh in their distant corner. The elder lady smiled, well pleased, but Miss Roche bit her lip with annoyance. She was not accustomed to being left out. But her turn came by-and-by when she entered the drawing-room dressed for dinner and her resplendent beauty quite cast Sissy into the shade. Even Lady Leigh was forced unwillingly to acknowledge the fact. As for Philip, he could not take his eyes off her. He gave his arm to Sissy, as in duty bound, but at dinner most of his conversation was addressed to his left-hand neighbor. Sissy looked tired and de-

pressed; she ate little, and Maxwell, who tried at first to engage her attention, presently desisted, finding it of no avail.

“Sir Philip,” said Eleanor, whose eyes had been wandering round the room, taking note of the beautiful old furniture and the pile of gold plate on the sideboard, “who is the lady in scarlet who hangs over the chimney-piece?”

“Hush!” said Philip, lowering his voice and glancing round apprehensively. “Don’t let my mother hear you. That is the ghost who is supposed to haunt the house.”

“A ghost! How romantic! And does she really do so?”

“So they say. I have never seen her myself. She is supposed only to appear to those who are meditating an injury to some pure and innocent person.”

Eleanor changed color. Conscience she had none, but her superstitious fears sometimes supplied the place of it.

“She is not a very creditable relative,” Philip resumed. “She fell in love with the

man her sister was engaged to, a former Sir Philip Leigh who, by-the-by, I am supposed to resemble strongly. His portrait hangs in the gallery upstairs. Finding it impossible to get rid of her in any other way, she quietly poisoned her rival in a cup of chocolate, which was what every one took for breakfast at that time. It is a curious thing, but not one of the Leighs can endure the taste of chocolate. The very sight of it sickens me. I remember my mother trying to make me drink it when I was a child. But it was no use; she had to give it up. A funny sort of retribution, isn't it, for the crime of a remote ancestress?"

"Very funny," murmured Eleanor abstractedly. "And how was it found out?"

"The murder, you mean? It never was found out for certain. There were plenty of shrewd guesses, but guesses are not proof. A favorite maid disappeared about that time who might have thrown some light on the subject. And as the lady soon afterward attained her object, and married Sir Philip

Leigh, it was not in the interest of the family to rake up the subject."

Eleanor was silent. Her face wore a disturbed and uneasy expression.

"People don't poison others nowadays," she said at last, rousing herself with an effort.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Eleanor," interposed Charlie suddenly, turning round. "It's not at all uncommon. A medical student told me I had no idea how many wives poisoned their husbands without being found out. It's so difficult to bring it home. But it requires a cool head and a sure hand. Now you, I should think, would make an admirable poisoner."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Miss Roche, flushing up, and Philip uttered an angry exclamation.

"No offense. I was only thinking of the necessary qualifications," getting up to open the door as Lady Leigh, catching Sissy's eye, rose to leave the room.

The conversation languished after dinner.

Eleanor leaned back in her chair, fanning herself with slow, indolent grace. She never took the trouble to exert herself in women's society, and she knew it was hopeless to try to fascinate Lady Leigh. If she won Philip, it would be in the teeth of his mother's opposition. Her presence was a blight on Lady Leigh and Sissy, who would have found plenty of subjects to talk about if they had been alone. When the men came in, Philip made a step toward Eleanor, but was forestalled by Maxwell, who quietly slipped into a chair by her side. Moved by Sissy's sad looks, and guessing their cause, he determined to create a diversion in her favor. Philip was forced to fall back upon Sissy, to whom, however, he vouchsafed a very distracted attention. His eyes were fixed on the pair opposite, and he wondered angrily what they could find to say to each other. Maxwell could make himself agreeable enough when he chose, and Eleanor's vanity was so flattered by the attentions of a man who had begun by taking no notice of

her that she laid herself out to the uttermost. Charlie Wharton was the only person who appreciated the humor of the situation. Philip's jealousy was so evident that it would have been comical if it had not been so pitiable; and, as for Sissy, it was like Maxwell's luck that she entirely misinterpreted his conduct.

"Bernard, too!" she thought bitterly. "Not one of them can resist her."

And when bedtime came she gave him her hand so coldly that poor Maxwell was quite dumfounded. So much for the result of our best intentions!

"I must see you alone," whispered Philip in Eleanor's ear, seizing the opportunity when his mother's back was turned. "When and where?"

"To-night in the conservatory when they have all gone up," she answered with a readiness that showed her an adept in the art of concealment.

"Faugh!" exclaimed Maxwell, passing his arm through Charlie's as they followed

Philip to the smoking-room. "That left a bad taste in my mouth. I don't like that cousin of yours, Charlie."

"Nor I. She's a scorpion. But I gave her one to-night just the same."

He related with glee their little encounter at the dinner-table. Maxwell laughed.

"I don't know about the poisoning. I should think her talents lay rather in the mining line."

"The *under*-mining, you mean," retorted Charlie.

Philip proved so glum and silent a companion that after a short time both young men rose and wished him good-night. Their host heaved a sigh of relief as they disappeared. He stood for a few minutes looking into the fire, then shook his head as though to get rid of some disturbing thought.

"And now for Eleanor," he exclaimed, and opened the conservatory door.

Half an hour later Charlie Wharton, retracing his steps from Maxwell's room, found that he had lost his cigarette case. It

was one on which he set considerable store, for Sissy had given it to him on his last birthday. The twins always made a great fuss over their double birthday, and celebrated it by giving each other handsome presents.

“Now where could I have left it?” he debated. “In the smoking-room, I suppose. I don’t like to leave it till the morning—it might get lost. Well, here goes. Hope I shan’t meet the Scarlet Lady.”

He descended the stairs. The reception-rooms opened into one another; the conservatory led out of the dining-room and separated it from the smoking-room. As Charlie entered the corridor he heard, to his surprise, the sound of voices.

“Servants, I suppose. Rather late for them to be about, though.”

The dining-room stood open; he chose it as the shortest way. Entering the conservatory, he saw two figures standing with their backs to him—a gentleman and a lady in evening dress.

"Beg pardon," he muttered mechanically; then, "Leigh! Eleanor!" in a tone of stupefaction.

They started round at the sound of his voice. Philip's face flushed to the very roots of his fair hair. Eleanor's scarcely deepened in color.

"You shall answer to me for this, sir," cried Charlie furiously.

"Whenever you please," returned Philip haughtily.

"As for you, you—" turning to Eleanor.

"Stop!" interrupted Philip. "Any words you like to me, but leave this lady alone."

"I shall say what I choose to my own cousin. Lady!" scoffed the boy. "Very ladylike behavior, truly! There isn't a servant in the house who wouldn't be ashamed of it—to be caught here at this time of night alone with another girl's lover!"

"Charlie!" exclaimed Philip, stepping forward and laying his hand on the boy's arm, "let me explain—"

"There is nothing to explain," shaking him off. "The fact speaks for itself. Keep your explanations for Sissy."

He turned on his heel and left them. There was a short silence. Then Eleanor said:

"I suppose he will tell Sissy."

"Of course," returned Philip gloomily. "But I shall not wait for that. I shall tell her myself."

"You?"

"Certainly. It is the least I can do. Poor little Sissy!"

He buried his face in his hands. Presently he heard Eleanor's voice in low, terrified accents:

"Philip! Philip! What is that?"

He looked up. From the dining-room door streamed forth a blue, unearthly light. It lasted for a full minute without anything else happening; and then, to their inexpressible horror, out stepped the Scarlet Lady. She came toward them with a slow, gliding motion, her face pale as death, her eyes shin-

ing like red-hot coals. As she passed the corner where they stood, Eleanor trembling violently, Philip with his arm thrown round her to sustain her sinking form, she turned and looked them full in the face. This was more than Eleanor could bear; she shrieked and went off into violent hysterics. Scream after scream re-echoed through the place, while Philip tried in vain to calm her, fearing that she would alarm the house. His fears were justified. In a few minutes they heard doors opening and shutting, steps coming along the passage. The door opened, and Lady Leigh, followed by her maid, stood on the threshold.

“Philip!” thunderstruck. “Miss Roche! What does this mean?”

Eleanor was in no state to reply. Philip took his mother on one side and endeavored to explain to her the state of the case. Lady Leigh heard him with manifest impatience.

“Nonsense, Philip. Don’t tell me! You know very well that I don’t believe in your ghost.”

"If you had been here, mother, you would have had no choice but to believe in it," answered Philip gravely. His face was white and his forehead damp with perspiration. "But never mind that now. Do something to help this poor girl if you can. She is in a pitiable state."

"Serves her right!" muttered Lady Leigh to herself. But, being a woman, she could not have helped compassionating bodily suffering in her worst enemy, and, going over to Eleanor, she began, with the help of her maid, trying such means as she could think of for her relief. These were soon effectual; Eleanor opened her eyes and stared wildly round, then a burst of tears came to relieve her overstrung nerves. Lady Leigh suffered her to weep for some time without interruption; then she touched her arm.

"Come," she said imperatively, "that will do. Now you had better come up to bed."

Eleanor's tears stopped; she rose obediently and went with the docility of a child.

At the door Lady Leigh halted and turned to her son.

“Mind, Philip,” she observed, “I shall expect an explanation of this to-morrow. I consider it a most disgraceful scene.”

CHAPTER VII

“I HAVE COMPROMISED ELEANOR”

SISSY's pure dreams were undisturbed by the evil visions that haunted the waking eyes of her guilty rival. She came down to breakfast in a pretty tailor-made dress of dark green cloth, which suited her rounded figure to perfection. Philip sat next to her; his manner was grave and unusually gentle. He spoke very little, but devoted himself assiduously to her. His face had changed color a little, when, on entering the room, his glance had fallen on the fated picture, and he had carefully chosen a seat with his back to it. Our midnight terrors lose a great deal of their substance in the clear light of day; yet, with the recollection of last night's horror fresh in his mind, he could not bring him-

self to meet the baleful glance of the Scarlet Lady.

Eleanor did not appear at breakfast. She sent word that she did not feel equal to it, but hoped to come down by-and-by. Sissy wondered a little, but made no remark. Had any other girl been in question, she would have gone into her room on her way down, but there was little private intercourse between herself and Eleanor. She ate her breakfast with a growing sense that there was something amiss. Once or twice she caught Lady Leigh's eyes fixed on her with an expression of *attendrissement* (I know no English word that expresses my meaning), but directly Sissy looked up they were instantly averted, as though their owner feared they might betray something she did not wish Sissy to know. Charlie, too, seemed to have something on his mind; he avoided meeting her gaze, and went through his breakfast in a silence that, from him, seemed almost funereal. The atmosphere was getting oppressive; Sissy was glad when

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the meal came to an end and she rose to go. Charlie caught hold of her hand as she passed him.

"Wait for me in your room, Sis," he said. "I have something to tell you."

Before she could answer, Philip interposed.

"If you don't mind, Sissy, I should like to speak to you first."

"You!" uttered Charlie, in a tone of almost fierce contempt.

"Yes, I," returned Philip firmly. "It is my right."

The two men exchanged glances of defiance. Philip's eyes fell first, unable to bear Charlie's proud, indignant gaze. The young man smiled scornfully.

"Don't forget, my fine fellow, that you and I have an account to settle," he muttered under his breath.

Sissy looked from one to the other in surprise. What did they mean?

"Of course I will see you first, Philip, if you wish it," she answered gently. "I sup-

pose what Charlie has to say can wait.”

“Oh, you will know it soon enough,” returned that young man enigmatically, turning on his heel.

Philip led the way into the morning-room and closed the door. He stood leaning against the mantel-piece, resting his head on his hand, while Sissy wondered more and more what the mystery could be. At last he roused himself.

“Sissy,” he began, “I have a confession to make to you. I would rather you heard it from me than from any one else.”

And then hurriedly, but without softening any of the details, he recounted the events of the previous night. Sissy turned very pale, but she heard him to the end without interruption.

“And now, Sissy,” he finished, “you know all. I place myself in your hands. You are the judge. I am ready and willing to keep my engagement if you will let me. It is for you to decide.”

Sissy did not answer immediately. Her

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face was buried in her hands, and she was praying earnestly for guidance. At last she looked up.

"Philip," she said, "answer me one question. If you were free to choose, which would it be, Eleanor or me?"

"You push me too hard," he exclaimed desperately. "Have I not said I am ready to keep my word?"

"Answer me," she insisted.

His eyes sought the ground, ashamed to meet her gaze.

"I have compromised Eleanor," he said, in a low voice.

"That is enough," said Sissy instantly; "you belong to her, not to me."

She turned to the door. Philip threw himself in the way.

"But, Sissy—" he began.

"There is no more to be said. Good-by, Philip. God bless you."

She left the room. Lady Leigh was crossing the hall. Sissy went up to her.

"Mother," she said, "let me call you so

once more—for the last time. For you have, indeed, been a mother to me.”

“Sissy! Sissy! What do you mean?” cried her friend, terrified by the girl’s manner and the wild look in her eyes. “There is some mistake. You have heard some garbled account. Let me explain.”

Sissy shook her head.

“There is no mistake,” she said mournfully. “I have seen Philip, and he has told me all.”

She broke off suddenly as Charlie came into the hall. At the sight of him, Sissy’s self-control gave way. She sprang toward him.

“O Charlie! Charlie!” she cried. “Take me away. Dear brother, take me home!”

And, putting her arms round his neck, she burst into a passion of tears. Those tears probably saved her from a serious illness. The effort she had made to contain herself in Philip’s presence had been beyond her strength; she broke down now, and cried like a child. Charlie soothed and comforted her

with the tenderness of a woman. They seemed suddenly to have changed places, and, whereas Sissy had hitherto always seemed the elder of the two, it was he who now took the lead and she who clung to him for help and protection.

"You are better now," he said, when the first violent outburst of weeping was exhausted. "Let me take you to your room."

She was still trembling, and needed the support of his arm. He half led, half carried her upstairs, and rang for her maid.

"Nana," he said, "will you put Miss Sissy's things together? We leave in half an hour. And stay with her, please, till I come back."

"Very well, Master Charlie," answered Nana, looking at him compassionately. She had been nurse formerly to both the twins, and loved them as if they had been her own. She knew as well as Charlie what had happened. The news had flown like wildfire through the servants' hall. It was not to be expected that Lady Leigh's maid would

keep silence as to what she had witnessed.

Satisfied that he left Sissy in good hands, Charlie left the room and went in search of Lady Leigh. He found her in the morning-room, looking pale and discomposed, having just come from a stormy interview with her son. She had begun by reproaching him bitterly with his conduct to Sissy, on which he turned on her and sternly requested her to hold her peace. There were limits, he said, to what a son would endure from his mother. He was a man now, not a boy, and must be allowed to be the best judge of his own actions. And with this he left her, stunned and stupefied, and feeling that the end of her reign at Langton was very near at hand. It would have been small consolation to know that he was silencing his own better self as well as her.

“Lady Leigh,” said Charlie, “I have come to ask a favor.”

She turned round, and he saw that her eyes were full of tears.

“Anything I can do—” she began eagerly.

"I know. You have always been kind. I am taking Sissy away. But Eleanor. Her presence is an insult to my sister. Will you keep her here till I can arrange for Mary to join her?"

"Since you ask me," reluctantly. "But, oh! Charlie, I wish to heaven she had never darkened these doors!"

"Then that is settled," said Charlie, not choosing to notice this remark. "Thank you, very much. It will make things easier."

He turned to the door. She stopped him.

"Charlie," she pleaded, "do not think more hardly of us than you can help. Philip is weak, not wicked. That woman has bewitched him."

The boy's face darkened.

"Dear Lady Leigh," he said, "for you I have no feeling but respect and affection. But you can not expect me to think very patiently of the man who has spoiled my sister's life."

CHAPTER VIII

“THE HAND OF DOUGLAS IS HIS OWN”

IT was late in the day when Eleanor made her appearance. She judged it prudent to keep out of the way till things had settled down. A curt note from Charlie apprised her of her cousin's departure and the arrangement he had made for herself. Mary, he said, would join her on the following day. She heard doors opening and shutting, voices in the distance, the sound of wheels on the gravel. Then all was quiet, and Eleanor thought she might venture down. To her disappointment, Philip was out. She was left to a tête-à-tête with Lady Leigh, who received her with chilling politeness. But Eleanor was not thin-skinned. She would have preferred to be on good terms with her hostess; but, after all, it was the son who mattered, not the mother. They sat to-

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gether through the long afternoon, occasionally exchanging a remark, but for the most part keeping silence. Lady Leigh wrote letters, and Eleanor read a French novel which she had brought with her, and which Lady Leigh observed with silent disapproval. It was past five o'clock when Philip came in, tired out, having ridden far and hard to deaden thought. Sissy's face haunted him as he had seen it last, her sweet eyes full of anguish. Philip was weak, not wicked, as his mother had said, and it was not easy for him to stifle the reproaches of his conscience. Eleanor had arrayed herself in a magnificent tea-gown of dark crimson, trimmed with lace. A colored tea-gown, she thought, was admissible even in mourning. But Philip scarcely seemed to notice her. His mother gave him a cup of tea, and he walked over to the fire and stood there drinking it, his back almost turned to the corner in which Eleanor was sitting. For the moment she was positively distasteful to him. The display of dress by which she had

thought to captivate him had exactly the opposite effect. It seemed to him almost indecent. He thought of Anne Boleyn putting on yellow robes and gloating over her fallen rival. Eleanor was conscious at once of his change of mood. What was to be done? If only she could get rid of that old mother of his! For, after all, the decisive words had not been spoken.

The fates were propitious to her. A maid came into the room and whispered something in Lady Leigh's ear. She rose with a look of annoyance.

“What is it, mother?” asked Philip. “Can I do anything?”

“No, my dear, I am afraid not. A tiresome old pensioner, whom I must see myself.”

She left the room. Philip threw himself into a chair, and took up the paper. Eleanor remained quietly in her corner. Presently he heard the sound of a stifled sob. He took no notice. Another. He threw down the paper with an impatient sigh.

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"Miss Roche," he exclaimed, "is anything the matter?"

No answer, but a lace handkerchief was applied to her eyes.

"Eleanor," in a softer tone. "Have *I* done anything?"

"How can you ask? I have done everything you wanted. I have quarreled with my best friends on your account—and you—despise me!"

The last words were almost inaudible—Philip was touched.

"Despise you!" he answered warmly. "No, Eleanor, it is myself I despise."

"For liking me?"

"No, a thousand times, no. Look up and say you believe me."

He crossed the room, and stood by her side. She raised her eyes. What strange magnetic power lay in their marvelous green depths that seemed to draw all the manhood out of him until, at last, with a groan, he sank at her feet and buried his face on her

knees. She passed her hand softly over his bowed head.

"Philip," she whispered, "do you love me?"

"God help me! More than my life—more than my honor."

"And you will marry me, not Sissy?"

"If you will have me."

A rattle at the door. They started apart. The next moment Lady Leigh came in, having paused for a moment to pick up her spectacle case. She glanced sharply at her son and Miss Roche, but they were at a most decorous distance from each other. Only Philip's face was flushed, like a man's after drinking strong wine, and Eleanor's wore an expression of subdued triumph. Her cause was won.

The next morning she was joined by Mary, whose eyes were reddened with weeping, and who looked very plain, poor thing, in consequence. That had happened which she had foreseen, and had endeavored in vain

to prevent, and her heart was heavy with shame and sorrow. Her reproaches left Eleanor unmoved. Philip escorted them to Holyhead, and saw them on board the boat. They traveled first class in a reserved carriage with obsequious guards and porters in attendance. The Roches were accustomed to travel third, and to give careful consideration to their modest tips. Eleanor felt, with satisfaction, that the old life of pinching and scraping already lay behind. But Mary gazed out of the window with misty eyes, taking little notice of her companions, whose low-toned conversation fell on unheeding ears. Eleanor had much to settle in a short time. She was leaving Philip behind, a dangerous thing to do, but before they parted she had his promise to come over and marry her directly the necessary arrangements could be made.

Philip's life was not exactly a bed of roses during the next few weeks. He tried in vain to induce his mother to be present at the wedding.

“No, Philip,” she said with spirit, “when she is once your wife I must receive her, I suppose. But until then I decline to countenance her in any way.”

And Philip knew her too well to endeavor to shake her decision. The county, with one accord, sided with Sissy. She was Miss Wharton, of Wharton, whom they had known from her childhood, a very different person from an “unknown adventuress,” as one old lady went so far as to call her. There was even a question as to whether she should be received, but this was over-ruled. The Leighs were too influential to be publicly slighted. But in many little ways Philip was made to feel the weight of general disapproval. Old friends met him with cold looks and averted glances; people, instead of stopping to speak, hurried on with a mere bow. At the meet of the hounds he was left conspicuously alone. Philip felt it keenly. Away from Eleanor her influence waned, and he realized all that he was giving up for her sake. It was only her beauty that cast

a spell over him. She wrote to him every day, but her letters did her more harm than good. A want of refinement betrayed itself in every line, and more than once Philip winced at some grammatical error. How different from Sissy's dainty little notes! But he had gone too far to recede. He had made his bed and he must lie in it.

Charlie had ridden into Larchester to consult Maxwell about a tutor. The two were fast friends, despite the difference in their ages. It was with deep disgust that Charlie had seen Sissy's dawning regard for Maxwell quenched when she fell suddenly and violently in love with Sir Philip Leigh. It was done in a moment; she was carried off her feet by an emotion so strong, so ardent, that it swept everything before it. There were religious difficulties to be overcome, but Philip gave way on every point, and Mr. Wharton had no excuse for refusing what was, after all, a brilliant match for his grand-daughter. It hurt Charlie on his own account to lose his twin-sister, who had

hitherto shared every thought with him, and who was now wrapped up in her lover. But he could not resist Sissy's pleadings and the sight of her happiness, and allowed himself reluctantly to be drawn into some sort of intimacy with Philip, though he still felt sore over the disappointment to his friend. As for Maxwell, he made no sign. His silent, reserved nature was not easy to fathom. To all appearance he was still content to be Sissy's friend, since he could be no more, and even Charlie could only guess at the depth of the feeling that lay below the surface.

As long as Sissy was happy, Maxwell could subdue his spirit to endurance. He had been brought up in a stern school, and had learned not to expect too much of life. What did he matter, after all? a younger son who had never been of much importance to any one. But Sissy—his ideal of all that was best and sweetest in womanhood, to see her rejected and cast aside by the man who had stolen her from him! If only he had the right to console her! But he knew Sissy's

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steadfast nature. She had given her love, and she could not withdraw it because the man she cared for had proved unworthy. He clenched his hands in impotent resentment.

Charlie lunched at the mess, where he was a frequent and welcome guest. After luncheon he went up to Maxwell's rooms for a talk and smoke. The conversation languished, however. Both were conscious of thoughts underlying the trivial words.

"I tell you, Maxwell," broke out Charlie suddenly, interrupting his friend's speech, to which he had been paying very little attention, "I won't stand it. Do you think I am going to sit down and pocket the affront? He shall give me satisfaction."

"What can you do, Charlie?" said Maxwell. "People don't fight duels nowadays."

"I can give him a good hiding the first time I come across him," the boy retorted. "Oh, I know he's bigger than I am, but a good cause lends strength to the arm."

“No, Charlie, you won’t do that. For Sissy’s sake. Do you want to make her name the talk of the county?”

“Do you suppose it isn’t that already?” asked Charlie bitterly. And then he suddenly broke down, and, laying his head on the mantel-piece, sobbed aloud.

“I can’t help it, Maxwell,” he uttered brokenly. “My little Sissy! So pretty and so good. Do you remember when she was quite a little girl you used to call her the Rose of Wharton? And now!”

“Is she so changed?”

“The old people don’t see it. She always manages to get up a smile for them. But she eats next to nothing, and when she comes down in the morning I can see by her eyes that she hasn’t slept. And then, when she thinks no one is looking, such a tired, hopeless look comes over her face, and she sighs—a sigh that would make your heart ache. Curse him!” exclaimed Charlie. “What on earth made her pitch on him? Why couldn’t she have taken to you instead?”

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"Don't, Charlie," said Maxwell unsteadily. "I can't stand it."

He walked over to the window and stood there, biting his moustache, and trying to control himself. They were very bitter thoughts which Charlie's words had roused.

"Well, I must be off, old man," said Charlie at length. "The days are getting short, and I have a long ride home. By-the-by, there's that collie pup you were asking about. When will you come over and see him? Come on Wednesday, and stay the night."

They descended the stairs, and stood waiting on the steps for Charlie's horse to be brought round. Just then Philip came into the yard, accompanied by two or three officers. He had been in Larchester interviewing the family solicitor on business connected with his marriage. At the sight of him, Charlie's eyes blazed; he made a step forward, grasping his hunting crop, but Maxwell touched his arm, and, putting a visible constraint on himself, he sprang into the saddle and rode away without looking back.

Philip hesitated a moment, then advanced.

“How are you, Maxwell?” he said, rather awkwardly, and held out his hand.

But Maxwell did not appear to see it. Philip turned very red.

“What am I to make of this, Maxwell?” he demanded.

“What you please. It is pretty clear, I think,” answered Maxwell coolly. “I don’t wish to continue our acquaintance.”

He walked away, leaving an uncomfortable sensation behind him. He had preached moderation to Charlie, but it is easier to preach than to practice, and his heart was not within him.

“I say, Maxwell,” said one of his brother-officers to him afterward, “you were a bit rough on Leigh just now. You need not have made it so public.”

“The hand of Douglas is his own,” quoted Maxwell lightly, and his friend judged it prudent to say no more.

CHAPTER IX

THE LARCHESTER BALL

Two years had gone by. Charlie had passed into the army, and into Maxwell's regiment. It was still stationed at Larchester, and, though Charlie no longer lived at Wharton, he was over there constantly with one or other of his brother-officers, who found the old house pleasant enough, with its young and charming hostess. For Sissy was practically mistress there now, though Mrs. Wharton nominally still held the reins. The old lady seldom stirred out of the house during the winter—such rough winters as they have in the North! Snow lay on the hills—damp snow, for there was always moisture from the Irish Sea. And when the wind shifted to the east it blew cold and piercing from the Yorkshire moors.

Only young blood could bear it. But the stout old walls shut out the cold, and coal is not stinted in the hospitable Northern counties. Charlie's pretty sister was the belle of the regiment. Half the young subalterns were in love with her; but, though delightful to all, no one could boast of any special favor. One or two suspected that "old Maxwell" might be a dark horse, but his devotion was too unobtrusive to excite remark. She had regained apparently all her old gaiety, but the wound was only skinned over and liable to ache at a careless touch.

Eleanor—Lady Leigh—had presented her husband with a son. There were great rejoicings at Langton, and the Dowager Lady Leigh, who had refused to be present at her son's wedding, consented to appear at her grandson's christening, where she figured as one of the sponsors. A year later the boy was followed by a girl, and Lady Leigh, who had taken up her abode in London, again came down to spend a few days under her son's roof. She was outwardly on

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good terms with her daughter-in-law, though no real sympathy could exist between such opposite natures. But Philip was her only child; and, little as she liked his choice, she had to make the best of it. Eleanor, on her side, felt the impolicy of being openly at variance with her husband's mother. People are conservative in the North, and Lady Leigh belonged to one of the oldest families in the county, whereas she herself was a newcomer, and had made a bad start to begin with. She temporized, therefore, on the surface. At the same time she was quite determined to stand no interference with her affairs. She ruled Philip completely. One of her first acts of authority was to order the removal of the Scarlet Lady. She could not eat her dinner, she declared, with that picture in front of her. The old housekeeper nearly went down on her knees to implore her not to risk the calamities which tradition averred would follow. Eleanor laughed in her face. She had no fear of tangible evils. They could be met and overcome.

It was the supernatural which daunted her. So the picture was taken down and banished to a remote garret, and its place was filled by a magnificent portrait of Eleanor dressed in white satin and painted by one of the first artists of the day.

Lady Leigh's visits to her son and daughter-in-law were never very long ones. The contrast was too painful between the past and the present. It was not pleasant to be a cipher in the house where she once was mistress; and though, in any case, she must have yielded her place to her son's wife. How different it would have been with Sissy!—dear Sissy, whom she had not seen or heard from since Charlie took her away. The breach was too complete. She could not outwardly side against her son. And Sissy, on her side, found it difficult, if not impossible, to make advances to Philip's mother. Yet each cherished the old tenderness in her heart, and the hope that one day the barrier might be removed.

It was all so different. Mary Roche kept

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house, while Eleanor sat at the head of the table and looked beautiful. And Mary's housekeeping was not to Lady Leigh's liking. She was not popular in the household, the servants considered her mean and cheese-paring. Her nature was essentially conscientious, and it took her some time to get accustomed to the inevitable waste of a large establishment. She toiled early and late at her ungrateful task, meeting with very little thanks from any one. Philip had no idea how the money went. He only knew that Eleanor's demands were not easy to satisfy. "Set a beggar on horseback" is a homely proverb, but with a good deal of truth in it. Eleanor spent with reckless prodigality—on herself—and, when Philip remonstrated, retorted:

"You would not have stinted Sissy. But she had money of her own. It is because I have none that you are so stingy!"

Which reduced him to silence.

"Sissy," said Charlie one evening, "what are you going to do about the ball?"

He had just come in from shooting, and was standing warming himself by the library fire.

"The ball, Charlie?" she echoed.

"Yes. You are going to it, of course."

"I thought not. It is such a long drive home."

"Rubbish!" interrupted Charlie. "You never thought it long before. Do you know what people will say? That you can not meet Sir Philip Leigh."

Sissy colored. It was true that, whether by accident or design, she had not met Philip since his marriage. He and Eleanor had been away a good deal, and the previous year, owing to the death of a local magnate, the ball had not taken place. The neighbors had avoided, as much as possible, asking Sissy to meet the Leighs. But this could not last.

"You need not be afraid," continued Charlie. "Our fellows will stand by you to a man."

"I am not afraid," said Sissy rather

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proudly. "And I will go, Charlie," with an effort, "if you wish it."

"That is my own brave girl," kissing her. "I do wish it. I can not bear you to show the white feather before that jade Eleanor."

He left the room, but Sissy remained behind. Her mind was rather disturbed. She had schooled her heart to submission; almost, she thought, to forgetfulness, but she was now to be put to the test. She rose, and, crossing the room, leaned her head against the window, from which she had so often watched Philip ride away in the days gone by. It was dark outside, but the moon was rising over the hill behind the belt of trees, and she could see faintly the white road winding upward through the park. He was married to another woman, the man with whom she had once thought to pass her life. Married! He had two children. She had met the little boy only yesterday with his nurse, a beautiful child, with his father's eyes, and nothing of his mother about him. She had not been able to resist the temptation of

stopping to give him a kiss. The nurse was a stranger, and would not recognize her. What would Charlie say if he knew? But there was no reason why he should know.

She moved away presently with a sigh, and went up to her room, where her old nurse was waiting to help her to dress for dinner.

"Mr. Charlie wants me to go to the ball, Nana," she said. "What shall I wear?"

"You must have a new dress, Miss Sissy," counseled Nana. "What you have isn't fit. All the county will be there, and you must look your best."

"Oh! what does it matter?" said Sissy rather wearily. "There is no one to care."

"Indeed, Miss Sissy, you are wrong to talk like that. What about Mr. Charlie—and Captain Maxwell, who worships the ground you walk on?"

"I think you must be in Captain Maxwell's pay, Nana," said Sissy, laughing. "You are always singing his praises."

So the dress was ordered from London, a delicate pale pink that suited Sissy to per-

fection, and brought out the soft tints of her eyes and hair. She drove into Larchester on the day of the ball, having arranged to dine with Mrs. Fraser, the Colonel's wife, who would chaperone her. Charlie was to see her home. Mrs. Fraser was a recent convert, and Sissy had been very kind to her at a time when she sorely needed sympathy and comfort. Colonel Fraser had taken his wife's change of religion very well. He said that, at her age, she had a right to judge for herself. But when, a year later, a boy was born to them, their first child, there was trouble. To please his wife, whose fretting over the matter threatened to endanger her health, he consented to have the child baptized in the Catholic Church. He attached little importance himself to infant baptism. But he would give no pledge for the future. There was nothing for it but to wait and pray. Sissy stood godmother to the boy, and comforted her friend with hopeful prognostications.

Already, she said, they had gained far

more than they had ventured to hope. Having become a Catholic after her marriage, Margaret Fraser could make no conditions. All depended on her husband's will. One day Sissy, who had gone into Larchester to do some shopping, went into the church to pay a little visit before returning home. Kneeling in front of the altar, she saw her friend, her fair, Madonna-like face upraised to heaven with a yearning look in her eyes, and holding out her child in her outstretched arms, as though imploring a blessing upon him. There was no one else in the church. Sissy felt like an intruder, and noiselessly slipped away.

"Sissy," said Margaret Fraser, greeting her with a warm embrace, "I asked Captain Maxwell to dine with us, and go on to the ball. I wanted your brother to come, too, but he was engaged."

"To the last object of his fickle affections," said Sissy, laughing, "Miss Skeffington."

"Was that it? I did not know. She is very pretty, isn't she?"

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"I suppose she is," said Sissy, "though not the style I admire. But she isn't the first, Margaret, and she won't be the last. Charlie's heart is like an omnibus—it carries many passengers, and none of them long.

It was a pleasant little dinner. Maxwell came out of his shell, and made himself very agreeable. He had a staunch friend in Mrs. Fraser, and was well aware of it. She knew Sissy's story, of course, and longed to see her married to a man who would make her forget the past. Sissy was a great favorite with the Colonel, and had more influence with him than she knew. Margaret, thinking of her boy, did all she could to promote a good understanding between them. Everything that made him more friendly to Catholics was a distinct gain.

Sissy entered the ball-room on the Colonel's arm, and was promptly surrounded and besieged with applications for dances. Her card was soon full to overflowing. The Rose of Wharton was looking her loveliest,



“‘You must come at once,’ he uttered hoarsely. ‘The child is dying.’”—*Page 125.*

and Maxwell could hardly take his eyes off her. She had been very sweet and friendly to him at dinner. Was it possible that there was a chance for him, after all? Charlie was flirting conspicuously with Miss Skeffington, who was nothing loth, but found time to keep a watch on his sister, who was manifestly enjoying herself. The ball was in full swing when the Langton party arrived, having been detained by a difference of opinion between Sir Philip and Lady Leigh. Eleanor had just finished dressing when the nurse came into the room with a disturbed and anxious air.

"I beg your ladyship's pardon," she began, "but would you please look in and see Master Philip before you go? He doesn't seem at all well."

Philip was standing by the dressing-table. He turned sharply round.

"What is the matter with him?" he demanded.

"It's croup, sir, I'm afraid," answered the woman. "He's breathing so heavy-like.

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He's not been himself all day. If her ladyship would just step in for a minute, I should feel more comfortable."

"It's no use my seeing him, Masham," said Eleanor. The maid was fixing the diamonds in her hair. "I couldn't do him any good. And I have perfect confidence in you, as you know. I am late as it is."

She rose as she spoke, and her maid brought forward her cloak.

"I'll go," said Philip, and followed the nurse along the passage. He was passionately fond of his boy, a fine little fellow, full of life and spirits, who had never yet known a day's illness. It was some time before he returned. Mary came into the room during his absence, and stood talking to her sister. She was well dressed, and looked almost handsome.

"The child is very ill," said Philip abruptly. "You had better send round and order the carriages not to come."

"What for?" asked Eleanor, raising her eyebrows.

"What for? You surely would not think of going off to a ball, and leaving him?"

"My dear Philip," impatiently, "if you wanted a model of all the domestic virtues, you should have married Sissy. Go?—of course I shall go. I have a new dress from Doucet, and I mean to show it."

"Then I shall remain behind."

"Do," said Eleanor scoffingly. "I have no doubt Mr. Blake will be most happy to take your place."

This hit Philip on a sensitive point. Mr. Blake was a handsome young Irishman whom Eleanor had picked up during the season, and who had been her constant shadow ever since.

"If you *will* go," he said irresolutely, "I suppose I must go with you. But I entreat you to reconsider it."

"I shall do nothing of the kind. What do you suppose our guests would say?"

"You can let them go without you."

"No, thank you! Just for some nonsense of Masham's! What does one pay a nurse

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for, I should like to know? It is her business to look after the child."

"Look here, Philip," interposed Mary good-naturedly, "would you like me to stay with him? I don't care about the ball, and if it would make you easier—"

"I wish you would, Mary," exclaimed Philip gratefully. "It is awfully good of you. You're fond of the boy, I know."

"Indeed I am," answered Mary simply.

The first person on whom Philip's eyes fell when he entered the ballroom was Sissy, standing at a little distance, talking to the Lord Lieutenant of the county. It was the first time he had seen her since their parting. He changed color and made a step forward, then recollected himself and turned away.

"Do you want to go and speak to your old love?" asked Eleanor with a smile. "Do. I shan't be jealous."

And, putting her hand on Mr. Blake's shoulder, she was instantly whirled away. Philip took no part in the dancing. He was

too uneasy. Leaning against a column, he watched gloomily his wife revolving in the arms of the different officers of the regiment. Eleanor looked magnificent; her beauty eclipsed easily that of every other woman in the room. Her dress, a wonderful creation of French art, fitted her like the skin of a snake. The Leigh diamonds sparkled in her hair and on her breast, and round her neck she wore a string of pearls that cost a small fortune. Toward the middle of the evening a note was brought to Philip in Mary's handwriting. He tore it open, turning almost green as he read, and hurried off in pursuit of Eleanor, who had stopped to rest at the further end of the room.

"You must come at once," he uttered hoarsely. "The child is dying."

And, thrusting the note into her hand, he rushed out of the room. Two lines were hastily scribbled in pencil:

"The doctor has no hope. Do not delay if you would see him alive."

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The note dropped from Eleanor's fingers, and she put out her hands as though to ward off a blow. For once even she was staggered. Her partner thought she was going to faint, and was filled with indignant pity.

"What a brute!" he thought. "Fancy telling her like that. The child's own mother!"

And aloud:

"Dear Lady Leigh, you must not lose heart. While there is life there is hope. It may not be as bad as they say."

"Indeed," faltered Eleanor, her eyes filling with tears, "I had no idea—"

"Of course you had not," he interrupted. "Let me get you a glass of water. You are as white as a sheet!"

Philip was standing at the door of the cloak-room, waiting for his wife when Sissy came up to him.

"Philip," she exclaimed, holding out her hands, "I have just heard. I am so sorry. Your dear little boy."

Before he could answer, Charlie appeared on the scene, his face like a thundercloud.

"Sissy," he said, "the carriage is waiting."

And he almost dragged her away.

"How dare you, Sissy," he began furiously, directly they were outside the door.

"How dare you speak to him!"

"Hush, Charlie," said Sissy with dignity. "You don't know what you are talking about. His child is dying!"

"Serves him right! No," checking himself, "I don't mean that. But it is not for you, Sissy, to console him."

Sissy made no reply. She was not going to discuss the point. She had followed the impulse of her heart, and she did not care what any one thought of her action. She leaned back in the carriage, her heart aching with pity for the man who had treated her so badly. Charlie's anger gradually cooled; as they turned in at the lodge gates, he stooped forward and kissed her.

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“Forgive me, Sissy,” he said. “It was for your sake I was angry.”

“Yes, I know, Charlie,” she said, returning his embrace.

And peace was restored between them.

CHAPTER X

ANOTHER MANIFESTATION OF THE SCARLET LADY

SIR PHILIP and Lady Leigh returned to their home in silence, Philip looking out of the opposite window. His wife's heartlessness had disgusted him. They reached the house, where the doors stood open to receive them. Mary met them on the stairs, her eyes swollen with weeping.

"Not there," as Philip made a step toward the nursery. "Come in here."

She opened the door of Eleanor's boudoir.

"But I want to see my boy!" he exclaimed.

Mary's eyes filled again with tears.

"Oh, Philip!" she said, with a look of infinite compassion. "It is too late. He died an hour ago in my arms!"

Philip flung himself into a chair, and

sobbed aloud. Eleanor stood as if turned to stone.

"How did it happen?" she asked at last.

"The doctor was out. We waited and waited. Masham tried everything she could think of. He got worse and worse. At last the doctor came. When he set eyes on the child, he said, 'It is too late. There is nothing to be done.' I sent off for you at once, but by the time the messenger reached you he must have breathed his last."

There was a long silence, broken only by Philip's sobs. At last he rose.

"Take me to him," he said, "I want to see him once more."

"Will you come, Eleanor?" asked her sister.

"No, thank you," returned Eleanor with a shudder. "I know you both look on me as a sort of murderess. I will go to my room."

She moved toward the door. On the threshold she paused and cast an appealing look at her husband. He did not stir.

"Go to her, Philip," whispered Mary. "She wants you."

"No," he answered gloomily. "She left my boy to die alone."

Does death ever draw people nearer together, I wonder? Far more often it brings estrangement. During the month that followed their child's death, the bereaved parents drifted farther and farther apart. Philip shut himself up in the library, where he spent hours, recalling every look and gesture of his lost boy. At last Eleanor grew seriously alarmed. Was she going to lose her hold on Philip altogether? That would never do.

To say that Eleanor was not shocked by her child's death would be untrue; cold and selfish as she was, she was not yet utterly hardened. She had been proud of the boy. For one thing he was the heir, the future Sir Philip Leigh. Her personal importance was diminished by his death. The estate was strictly entailed, and if she had no other son it would go to a distant cousin when

Philip died. She felt, too, as keenly as it was in her to feel anything, her husband's attitude toward her. He scarcely spoke to her, and when she addressed him answered her in monosyllables. Every time he looked at her he seemed to see her dancing at the very hour when her child lay dead.

This state of things must not be allowed to go on. She had won him once in the teeth of every obstacle; surely she could win him back again. It would require some skill; the part she had enacted then would not now be suitable. But she had confidence in her own powers; she knew every chord of the instrument on which she proposed to play. There are two natures in man, the higher and the lower, warring against each other, as St. Paul tells us. Sissy's influence had roused a latent nobility in Philip, but Eleanor appealed to his baser instincts. He had deteriorated much in the two years of his married life.

Philip was sitting as usual alone in the library. The day was drawing to a close,

and the shadows lay dark and heavy in the corners of the room. His face was buried in his hands, and he was thinking sadly and regretfully of the past. What had he gained by the indulgence of his mad passion? Estrangement from his mother, the loss of his old friends. Was it the punishment of Heaven that had overtaken him?

Ah, no, that surely would not have fallen on his innocent child! What a sweet impulse had brought Sissy to his side in his hour of sorrow! There was no guile, no bitterness in her tender spirit. Fool that he had been to exchange pure gold for dross!

A knock at the door. He started.

"Who is it?" he demanded.

"It is I, Eleanor."

"What do you want?"

"I wish to speak to you. Let me in."

Unwillingly he crossed the room and unlocked the door. His wife stood on the threshold in her deep mourning, very pale, her eyes reddened as though she had been weeping.

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"Philip," she said, "why will you sit and grieve alone? Is not your sorrow mine? Let us mingle our tears together."

"Your tears!" he uttered bitterly. "How many have you shed, I wonder?"

"More than you think," she replied. "But not where I should have shed them—in my husband's arms."

Philip moved uneasily in his chair.

"I know," she went on, pursuing her advantage. "You think that because I do not realize things beforehand I have no feeling. Do you think I did not feel it, when, on the night that our child died, you turned your back upon me—his mother?"

He did not answer. His wife looked at him steadily for a moment, then threw herself into a chair and burst into tears.

"You do not care for me," she sobbed. "Your love has grown cold—oh! why did I listen to you? Why did I not let you marry Sissy? You would have been happier with her than with me."

"Upon my soul, Eleanor!" cried Philip,

starting up. He stopped short, remembering his thoughts of a while ago.

Eleanor was watching him from under her narrowed eyelids.

"You see," she said, "you can not deny it. You regret her—you have ceased to care for me—and I, unhappy woman that I am! Why did I love you? Why did I ever cross your path?"

She covered her face with her hands. Philip was deeply disturbed. She had turned the tables and put him completely in the wrong. Poor Eleanor! He had misjudged her. She loved him, after all. He paced the room for a few minutes in silence; then he suddenly stopped beside her chair.

"Eleanor," he said entreatingly, "don't. I can not bear to see you cry."

"How can I help it," she murmured, "when you are so unkind?"

"But I am not—I will not be unkind any more."

She raised her head; then, with a sudden

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movement, she flung her arms round his neck.

"Kiss me, Philip," she whispered, and he obeyed.

Her cause was won. Half an hour later she came out of the library, leaving Philip to interview his bailiff. It was growing dark, and the figures of the knights in armor looked grim and ghostly in the hall. She had forgotten a book in the conservatory, and opened the dining-room door to pass through. Here it was lighter; the room faced west, and a red light still lingered in the sky from the sun which had just gone down. It shone full on Eleanor's portrait over the mantel-piece. She looked at it with an expression of satisfaction blended with triumph.

"Rather more ornamental, I flatter myself," she said aloud, "than the daub that was here before. The idea of their being influenced so long by that rubbishy old prediction! The thing was a perfect eyesore."

But while she gazed, a strange thing hap-

pened. A sort of faint glow began to overspread the picture; it deepened and deepened till the whole dress seemed bathed in scarlet. It seemed as though something behind were trying to force its way through the canvas. The eyes grew like red-hot coals, the lips were wreathed in a baleful smile. It was no longer Eleanor's portrait, but that of the Scarlet Lady.

Eleanor uttered a faint scream, and hid her face in her hands. When at last she ventured to look up, the strange appearance had vanished. The light had faded out of the sky, the room looked cold and gray, and her own portrait, unchanged smiled down from the wall in all its haughty consciousness of beauty.

"It must have been my fancy," she muttered. "The reflection from the sunset."

But she left the room hurriedly, without looking round. Such fancies were not good to have.

CHAPTER XI

LADY LEIGH'S DEATH

SPRING is late in the North, with long cold days and hard frosts at night. Wild gales come sweeping over the sea, and, passing over Wharton Hall in its sheltered hollow, beat against the little wood at the top of the hill where the trees, twisted and stunted as they are, and growing all to one side, have yet withstood their fury so many years. Bending to every blast, they still interpose a barrier that breaks the force of the wind and gives shelter to the country beyond. Blown about by the wind, her hair ruffled and her cheeks aglow, Sissy came into the morning-room with a breath of fresh air, her arms full of flowers for the chapel, and stopped short as she caught sight of her grandmother's face.

"What is it, granny?" she asked. "Is anything wrong?"

"Have you seen the paper, Sissy?" asked Mrs. Wharton.

"No—why? Is there anything in it?"

"I am afraid it will grieve you, my darling. Lady Leigh is dead!"

Sissy sat down suddenly, but did not speak. The flowers fell unheeded to the ground. Dead! Never to see her again, never to break the silence between them. Oh, if she had but spoken sooner! And now it was too late. The irrevocableness of death is terrible to the young. The future is full of possibilities to them. Anything may happen in life. But death!

"How did she die, granny?" she asked presently. "Does it say?"

"Suddenly—at her residence in Hertford Street, Mayfair. There are no details. It is just a short notice."

Sissy said no more. After a while she got up and went to her own room. She felt she must be alone, to try to realize what had happened. Her heart was full of unavailing regret. Why had she never written? It

seemed so easy now to have done so, and yet at the time she had found it impossible. What had kept her back? Not pride, surely. No, she had never felt that where Lady Leigh was concerned.

A step came along the passage, and a knock at the door.

"Who is there?" she called out, impatient at being disturbed. Could they not leave her in peace to mourn her dead?

"It is I, Sissy," came her grandmother's voice in reply, and she hastened to unlock the door.

"Oh, granny," said Sissy reproachfully, kneeling by her side as the old lady sank into a chair, breathless with the effort of mounting the stairs. "Why didn't you send for me? You shouldn't have come up."

"I had to—I couldn't let any one else—Sissy, I don't know how to tell you—Philip is here, and asks to see you."

Sissy sprang to her feet, and the color rushed over her face.

"Granny! What does it mean?"

"He has a message for you, I think, from his mother. But if it hurts you to see him, my darling, I will send him away."

"No, no, we can not do that. But wait a minute."

She put her hand to her heart, as though to control its beating. The color had left her cheek, and she was very pale.

"A glass of water, dear?" said her grandmother anxiously, but she shook her head.

"I am all right, granny. It was the surprise—and the shock. Where is he?"

"In the library."

Sissy descended the stairs. Outside the library door she paused a moment to gather strength for the interview before her. Philip was standing by the window, with his back turned. How often had she found him like that, and stolen upon him from behind! He turned. A feeling of suffocation came over her, and the room swam before her eyes. Then the mist cleared, and she saw him coming toward her.

"It is kind of you to see me," he said

gently. "I would not have ventured to ask, but I bring you a message from my mother."

"Will you not sit down?" asked Sissy, herself scarcely able to stand.

He took a seat at a little distance. She noticed with a pang how pale and ill he looked.

"Tell me about her," she said, and he obeyed.

"She was ill only a few hours. They telegraphed for me, and I got there in time to see her alive. She spoke of you, Sissy. She sent you this ring and said, 'Tell her I always loved her, and ask her to forgive you for my sake.'"

Sissy was weeping bitterly.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "She need not have said that. I forgave you, Philip, long ago."

"And we are friends?"

"Always—whenever you want me."

She stretched out her hand. He took it and held it a moment, then let it fall.

"They say," he said abruptly, "that you are going to marry Maxwell. Is it true?"

Sissy colored, and cast down her eyes.

"No," she answered in a low tone.

"I am glad of that. I should have lost you, Sissy, altogether."

Neither he nor Sissy noticed the selfishness of this avowal. He had spoiled her life so far; he was doing his best to spoil it still. He rose to take leave. Then, with a little hesitation:

"The funeral is to-morrow, Sissy. Will you come?"

"I should like to. At what time?"

"Eleven o'clock, at Langton."

"I will be there," she promised, and he left the room. Sissy sank into a chair, feeling stunned and stupefied. Had Philip really been there? in that very room? It seemed like a dream. She had thought the last link between them broken by his mother's death, and now that death seemed to have constituted a fresh claim upon her. He had lost his best friend, poor Philip! Who could say? He might need her help some day—and if the time came she would not fail him.

CHAPTER XII

“FIFTY THOUSAND HORSE AND FOOT GOING
TO TABLE BAY”

SISSY mourned her dead friend truly and deeply. Charlie made no comment when she put on a black dress, but he felt that Maxwell had no luck. Just when she seemed to be getting over it, came first the boy's death, and then Lady Leigh's, to re-awaken her interest in Philip. It was all so useless. Her youth was being wasted, and all for the sake of a man who had not known how to value her, and who now selfishly absorbed her thoughts to the exclusion of the one who would have given all he possessed to make her happy.

Spring deepened into autumn, and rumors of war were gradually gathering strength. The air was full of anticipation. Ever since the Jameson raid the country had faced the probability of trouble. Negotiations were

still going on, but half-heartedly, and both sides were secretly preparing. Troops were being drafted out in small detachments, so as not to excite suspicion. All through the summer and early autumn, people were watching and waiting. And then, one fine morning in October, Sissy, coming home from the village, where she had been to visit a sick child, saw Charlie standing on the terrace. He waved to her, and she quickened her steps.

“Great news, Sissy,” he called out directly she came within hearing. “It has come at last. War is declared. The regiment is ordered to the front.”

His face was flushed with excitement. She uttered a little cry.

“Oh, Charlie, when?”

“This day week.”

“So soon?”

“There is no time to be lost. We are wanted out there. Why, Sis,” passing his arm round her as he saw she trembled, “You, a soldier’s daughter!”

"My father died in battle. Why did you remind me! If I were to lose you, too!"

"Cheer up, old lady," kissing her, "I shall live to plague you yet. We'll smash up the Boers in no time, and eat our Christmas dinner in Pretoria."

"I hope so," said Sissy, but without conviction.

"Maxwell is here," continued Charlie. "I sent him in to break it to the others. What a good fellow he is, Sissy. I wish you could care for him."

"I wish I could."

"Why can't you?"

She was silent.

"Do you mean to say you care for that fellow still?"

A painful flush overspread her face.

"I wonder at you, Sissy," exclaimed Charlie bitterly. "I thought you had more pride. Do you think it is pleasant for me to know that people are pitying my sister because she can not get over being jilted by Sir Philip Leigh?"

Sissy's eyes flashed.

“You have no right to speak to me like that, Charlie,” she said indignantly. She was turning away, but he caught hold of her hand.

“Don't let us quarrel, Sissy,” he pleaded. “We have no time for that. How can I help being vexed? Are you going to remain an old maid on Leigh's account?”

“Better that than marrying a man I do not love.”

“But you would get to love him,” he persisted. “A good woman always loves her husband.”

A trite old theory! Sissy shook her head.

“No, Charlie, it would not do. We should both be wretched. I am very sorry. It is not my fault.”

“I am not so sure of that. If Leigh had not come along, you would have married Maxwell.”

“Perhaps. But it is too late now.”

“You might at least say something nice to him before he goes,” urged Charlie. “He

is awfully cut up at saying good-by to you."

"There is the luncheon bell," exclaimed Sissy, glad to escape further argument, and Charlie followed her into the hall.

Maxwell came forward to greet her. He had performed his task as gently as possible, but Mrs. Wharton's hands were trembling as she strove to knit, and the Squire was walking up and down with short, uneven steps and a perturbed look on his face. Charlie sat down by his grandmother and possessed himself of her hand, knitting and all.

"We shall soon be back, granny dear," he said, "covered with glory."

Maxwell was not so sanguine. He knew the country and the people.

"The Boer is a tough customer," he said. "He will take some beating. But we shall win in the end, of course."

The Squire said nothing. His thoughts had gone back many years, to the day on which he saw his brave young son setting out like Charlie, full of life and spirits, for the

campaign from which he was never to return.

“Dear grandpapa,” whispered Sissy, passing her hand through his arm, “God will take care of him.”

“Yes, child, yes,” he answered, “but God’s ways are not always our ways.”

At luncheon, however, he roused himself and discussed the situation with Maxwell, who had already been out in South Africa. Despite his age he took a keen interest in current events, and was always up to date.

“I wish we had a better cause,” he said. “That Jameson raid has put us in the wrong.”

“Well, grand, we are in for it now, and must make the best of it,” exclaimed Charlie, looking as though he thoroughly enjoyed the prospect. “You don’t expect the British Empire to climb down before a couple of beggarly little states.”

“Our hand has been forced, sir,” said Maxwell; “the Boers meant to fight all along.”

"And I suppose we did, too," said Mr. Wharton. "The lust for gold is at the bottom of it all."

After luncheon the two young men went out on the terrace to smoke. Sissy joined them after a while, and, mindful of Charlie's words, invited Maxwell to take a turn with her through the gardens. He accepted with alacrity. They passed through the shrubberies, and Sissy opened a little wicket gate, through which they emerged on a forest of ferns, some of them over six feet in height, with green paths intersecting them in different directions. In old days deer used to nestle amid the bracken, and, though they had long been done away with, it would not have seemed strange even now to see a stag rear its antlered head above the mass of green, which was rapidly turning yellow with the early night frosts. Below them stretched the blue and shining sea, bounding the horizon, with here and there a solitary sail dotting its surface. There, in the west, lay Ireland, the Emerald Isle, out of

sight, but present to the imagination. On the right, beyond the bay, the misty mountains of the Lake District rose one behind the other in all their poetic loveliness, and between lay wood and valley and water, meadows and broken ground, with a rocky crag uplifting its stony brow. This was Sissy's favorite spot; she loved the pure air of the moorland, the salt breath of the sea, the broad expanse of untrammelled nature that filled the eye and satisfied the mind.

“Shall we sit down?” she said, and chose a mossy seat, while Maxwell found a convenient boulder and bared his head to the breeze. For a while neither spoke. Then Sissy said, with a little embarrassment:

“I have been wanting so much to thank you for all you have done for Charlie. It has been simply everything to him being under you. For Charlie's sake—”

“Is it only for Charlie's sake, Sissy?” interrupted Maxwell; and, she tried to stop him: “No, let me speak. A man has a right

to be heard. I have been silent too long. If I had spoken sooner—"

"It would have made no difference," said Sissy sadly. "But you are right—I will listen. It was only to save you pain—"

And then he pleaded his cause with a warmth and passion of which she had thought him incapable. He told her how long he had loved her, how for years she had been the lode-star of his existence, the center of all his hopes and thoughts. How, when another man had won her, he had crushed down his pain and put her happiness before his own. But now—now that there was nothing to part them—

"Only a memory," said Sissy with a sigh, "but it leaves me nothing to give. I could not come to you empty-handed."

"Even so, Sissy," cried Maxwell eagerly. "If you would only give me the chance of trying to win your love."

Her eyes were bent on the ground; her face was troubled.

"Listen to me," he pleaded. "A man

must think of himself, but I am thinking of you, too. You are throwing away the best years of your life for the sake of a dream of the past. Your grandparents are old; in the course of nature, they can not live long. Charlie will marry, sooner or later. What will you do then, Sissy? You will be very lonely. If you would trust yourself to me, I would do my utmost to make you happy.”

“I know you would,” said Sissy, much troubled. “But it is too one-sided. I should only disappoint you.”

“I would take the risk of that.”

She lifted her eyes.

“Look into your own heart. Could you forget so easily?”

“Yes—if the object of my love were unworthy,” he answered firmly.

“Then men are different from women.”

A pause. Maxwell shifted his ground. He was a soldier, and had studied tactics.

“Well, Sissy, I will not press you. Perhaps it is hardly fair. The chances of war

are uncertain, and I may not live to return. But, if I do, will you let me speak again?"

Her eyes filled with tears.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "you are too generous. I can not refuse."

"I may write you, Sissy?"

"Of course."

"You will try to like me a little?"

"I will—I do—more than you think."

"And remember me in your prayers?"

"When I pray for Charlie, I will think of you, too."

She gave him her hand, and he raised it to his lips. He was not ill-satisfied. He had gained more than he had dared to hope. She had promised to think of him, she would read his letters. It would be hard if he could not manage to establish an interest in her heart. They retraced their steps in silence, but just before they reached the house he stopped her.

"Thank you, Sissy," he said earnestly. "This has made a great difference to me. You have given me something to hope for."

It was a new Maxwell who spoke, and Sissy wondered. There was a light in his eyes and a ring in his voice. He had lost the constraint and diffidence which had hitherto characterized him in her presence. She began to understand why Charlie looked up to him and followed him, and felt a new esteem for him springing up in her mind.

All was now bustle and activity. Sissy went in to Larchester to spend a few nights with the Frasers, and help Charlie with his preparations. She spent most of her time writing to the Army and Navy Stores. The Frasers' house was close to the barracks, and Charlie dashed in at all hours of the day with fresh lists of what he required. Mrs. Fraser was equally busy, but she and Sissy found intervals for conversation, and in one of them Sissy told her about her interview with Maxwell. She was greatly pleased.

“He is such a good fellow, Sissy. He deserves his reward.”

“Do you call me a reward?” asked Sissy, smiling.

"A very sweet reward for any man," answered her friend warmly. "But you do like him, Sissy, don't you?" with a note of anxiety in her voice.

"Very much—very much, indeed. But, oh! Margaret, liking is not loving, and it is so difficult to forget."

"This will make it easier," said her friend, kissing her.

And Sissy hoped it might. It was time she gave up thinking of Philip, who had chosen his own life apart from hers. She would always be his friend if he wanted one, but since his mother's funeral she had not heard from him. Eleanor ruled at Langton. She had reduced her husband to a cipher, and filled the house with her own friends. The county looked on disapprovingly and held aloof; Lady Leigh's guests were not to its taste.

Maxwell made no outward sign of any understanding between himself and Sissy. He had gone back to the formal "Miss Wharton," and behaved as if nothing had

happened. Sissy was grateful for his forbearance. It gave her time to get accustomed to their changed relations. For, though he had left her free, she knew she had given him a pledge for the future, and was too honest to try to evade it.

He kept his own counsel where Charlie was concerned. He would have dearly liked to tell him what would give him so much pleasure to hear, but he knew the young man's impetuous nature, and dreaded some indiscretion. Charlie's methods were apt to be forcible and direct, and any premature jubilation might ruin all. He was treading on very delicate ground. Sissy must not be startled or made to feel that she had promised more than she could perform.

“How is my godson this morning?” asked Sissy, coming into the breakfast-room. “I thought I heard him screaming a short time ago.”

“He had broken his last new toy,” answered Mrs. Fraser. “But he says he is quite good now.”

"He has powerful lungs," remarked the Colonel, unfolding his newspaper. Then, as he glanced down the sheet, he uttered an exclamation.

"What is it?" asked Mrs. Fraser eagerly.

"Nothing much. The Boers have entered Natal on the north and west, and occupied Charleston. They are moving on the east by Buffalo River. We shall soon come into collision. Well, Maggie, I must be off. Any commands?"

"Must you really leave us to-day, Sissy?" inquired Mrs. Fraser.

"Yes, Margaret, I am afraid I must. I hear granny has her bronchial cough again, and I am anxious about her."

"Then Malcolm will take you to the station. You are sure you would rather go by train?"

"Yes, it is more convenient. The carriage will meet me at Carnston. It saves a long drive. I have done everything I could for Charlie, and you will see to the rest, Margaret."

It was a bright autumn afternoon, and the air, though keen, was fresh and exhilarating. More than one admiring glance followed Sissy as she walked up and down the platform, with Colonel Fraser's tall, soldierly figure by her side. The train was late, and it was too cold to sit down.

“I shall see you on Friday, Sissy,” said the Colonel, “but there will be no time for anything then. This is our real good-by, and I wanted to ask you to look after Margaret and the boy if anything goes wrong with me.”

“Of course I will, Colonel Fraser,” said Sissy earnestly. “You know how I love them both. But you must not think of that.”

“One never knows. I have been in many fights, but the pitcher may go once too often to the well. That is in God's hands. But it was on my mind to speak to you. You are of the same Faith, and she is fond of you. I respect her belief, though I can not share it. I was brought up in a different school.

If I die I would leave her a free hand with the boy."

"Oh! Colonel Fraser, would you, really?" cried Sissy breathlessly. "What would this not be to Margaret?"

"Mind, not a word of this to her now. If I come back I may alter my mind. But she would bring him up a Christian and a gentleman, and a man is a fool who thinks he can control matters after his death."

The train came up, and there was no time for more. Colonel Fraser put Sissy into a carriage, and wrung her hand.

"God bless you, Sissy," he said in a moved voice. "You have been a true little friend to us. I leave her in good hands."

He stood back, and lifted his hat as the train moved off.

When Sissy got back, she found Mrs. Wharton better, which was a relief, for she had set her heart on seeing her brother off, and did not like to leave the old lady ailing. Charlie rode over the day before he left, to say good-by to his grandparents. His ex-

citement had quieted down, and he was rather subdued.

“I wonder if I shall ever see the dear old place again?” he said, gazing round, as he stood on the terrace with Sissy, who had come out to see him start.

“Charlie! How can you talk like that?”

“Well, the Colonel and Maxwell are always croaking. They say we English despise our enemy and will find out our mistake too late. There’s one comfort, Sissy. If I don’t get it, you will. We are the last of the race, and you are as fond of it as I am.”

“I only care for it for your sake,” said Sissy passionately. “I could not bear it without you.”

She went down to Southampton the next day to see the last of him. They stayed the night at a hotel, which was crowded to overflowing, and had great difficulty in securing a private sitting-room which they shared with the Frasers. Both Sissy and Margaret felt that they could not face the public dining-room that night. Maxwell joined them

after dinner for a few minutes, but he was very busy, and apologized for hurrying away. Sissy had no thought for him, or for any one but her beloved twin, whom she was to lose on the morrow. Colonel and Mrs. Fraser retired early, but Charlie and Sissy sat up late into the night, her hand clasped in his, her head resting on his shoulder. They talked at intervals, but for the most part kept silence, their hearts too full for speech. At last Charlie looked at his watch, and got up with a start.

"We must go to bed, Sissy. You must get some sleep before the morning. Come, I will take you to your room."

He escorted her along the passage, and held her in a tight embrace before he kissed her and left her.

It is a solemn thing to see a transport start, laden with troops, many of whom will never see their native land again, solemn and moving even when there is no one near and dear to us on board. But when it bears away what we love best in the world, the very

heart seems wrenched out of our bosom. It was Maxwell who dragged Charlie away from his almost fainting sister, yet it was Maxwell who returned a moment later to press her hand and murmur in her ear, “Courage, Sissy, I will bring him back to you.” The great ship weighed anchor and steamed slowly away down the harbor, the troops drawn up on deck, the bands playing “The Girl I Left Behind Me.” Crowds ran along the jetty, accompanying them as far as they could, but Sissy and Margaret Fraser remained where they were. It was only prolonging the agony. Charlie stood waving as long as he could distinguish them, and the last Sissy saw through her tear-dimmed eyes were her brother and the man who loved her side by side, Maxwell’s hand on Charlie’s shoulder.

CHAPTER XIII

THE HARDEST PART

“**H**ERE we are off Madeira,” wrote Charlie. “Such a lovely spot! I wish you could see it, Sissy. But fighting is going on, and I am wild to be at it. This old snail of a ship is so confoundedly slow. Maxwell sends greetings, but will not write this time. Indeed, there isn’t much to tell you, but wait till we get out there! Everybody on board is very fit, and I find I am a good sailor, which is a mercy.”

Margaret Fraser had taken a flat in London, to be near the center of news. She had been fortunate enough to find a tenant at once for the house at Larchester, and established herself in Kensington on Campden Hill, where the air was pure and the gardens accessible for her boy. They were to spend Christmas at Wharton, and Sissy

had promised to pay her a visit on her return to town.

It seemed lonely and strange at first in the great city, where no one knew or cared about her, and she was a unit among millions. But soon all personal feeling was merged in a passionate sympathy with every one belonging to her race. It was enough to be English at such a moment. For news was coming over the wires—bitter news for England. Talana Hill and Elandslaagte, victories as costly as any defeat. Then came the cruel mistake of Nicholson's Nek, the loss of life, the shame and grief of surrender. Margaret broke down when she heard it; she, the daughter and wife of soldiers, knew what it meant to the men. Who hoisted the white flag was never known, but the men cried when they laid down their arms. "We would rather have died, Father," sobbed the Fusiliers to their priest.

It is not my pretension to dwell on the events of the war, which have been related by so many abler and better informed writers,

but to tell how they affected those who had the hardest part to bear, the women of England, watching, waiting, and hoping, almost despairing at times, while those nearest and dearest to them were daily and hourly risking their lives. Those were dark days, when the English set their teeth hard, while reverse after reverse attended our arms, and the whole Continent exulted over our misfortunes. The national spirit was roused. Troop after troop of volunteers was formed. Lord Lovat's scouts were raised in the Highlands; the Lord Mayor's offer of City Imperial Volunteers was accepted. Buller had asked for 8,000 irregular mounted infantry. In every English county men vied with one another in offering to serve their country. Those who had nothing, cheerfully gave themselves; those who were rich, equipped contingents, fitted out hospital ships, and served as privates in the companies raised on their own estate. Nor were the great manufacturers left behind. In addition to their huge contributions in food and money, they

continued the pay during absence of those of their employees who had volunteered, and looked after their families if they were killed. Two young men were dining at the Trocadero restaurant, one in khaki, on the eve of his departure for the war. Dinner over, they asked for the bill. It was handed to them receipted "with Mr. Lyons's compliments, and he could not take anything from a gentleman going out to the front." This was one among many instances. Meanwhile the foreign papers teemed with abuse.

Margaret was soon drawn into one of the women's committees formed for sending comforts to the sick and wounded, and warm clothing to the men in the field, exposed at night to the keen air of the veldt after the scorching heat of the day. Her time was fully occupied, and she made many friends, for nothing draws people together like a common cause. Her fellow-workers fell under the spell of her beauty and tender, gracious womanhood, and, unknown to herself, she soon exercised a considerable influence,

due partly to her Scotch common sense and the practical knowledge which she brought to bear on the matters in hand.

Letters now began to arrive from the seat of war, eagerly read and fondly treasured. The Colonel had written on landing, and again, a week later, when they were sent up to join Buller's force for the relief of Ladysmith.

"We are sitting in front of the Tugela," wrote Charlie to Sissy, "the Lord knows for how long. Slow and sure spells Buller. He is not going to take any risks. But it makes one rather mad."

A pause—then in rapid succession the news of three battles—three disasters—Magersfontein, Stormberg, Colenso. In one week three crushing blows to British prestige in South Africa! Margaret and Sissy trembled as they read the long list of killed and wounded, but the names they feared to find were not there. Lord Roberts's only son had fallen in a gallant attempt to save the guns. It was England's dark hour. The

old Queen, broken-hearted over her country's misfortunes, sent for Roberts and Kitchener.

On the eighteenth of December, Lord Roberts was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the forces, and Kitchener his chief of staff. People began to hope that the tide would turn. A few small successes put heart into the men. Buller was gathering up strength for a fresh attempt to relieve Ladysmith, and a long line of transports stretching southward toward Africa was steadily pouring reinforcements into the country.

CHAPTER XIV

CHRISTMAS AT WHARTON

A FEW days before Christmas Margaret and her boy arrived at Wharton, to be warmly welcomed by Sissy, who had found life rather dull, with no one of her own age to speak to. She was sincerely attached to her grandparents, but they were at the opposite poles of existence, and, with Charlie away, and no visitors to break the monotony, she often found time hang heavy on her hands. Everything was changed by the advent of Margaret and her child. He was a bonny baby, just two years old, with brown eyes and tightly curling flaxen hair. It was pleasant and strange to hear the old house re-echo with childish cries and laughter. Everybody made much of him, and the old Squire was his devoted slave. It was funny to see them trotting about together, the child holding tightly to the old man's forefinger

and chattering away in baby language, not always easy to understand. Margaret settled down at once into the ways of the house, with a restful feeling. The atmosphere was so calm and peaceful, and she loved the quiet little chapel, to which she used to steal away unobserved to say her prayers. Sometimes Sissy, coming in for the same purpose, found her there, her beautiful face aglow with devotion, and longed to tell her of the Colonel's words. But she could not betray his confidence, and, after all, the child was so young; he was all his mother's at present.

The two friends were very happy together, each busy with her own work. Margaret had much correspondence in connection with her committee, and spent most of the morning writing, while Sissy came in and out in the intervals of her domestic duties.

"What is it, Sissy, dear?" asked Margaret, looking up and catching sight of her friend's troubled face.

The post had just come in, and Sissy held an open letter in her hand.

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"It is from Bernard Maxwell. Oh! Margaret, I wonder if I have done right. He cares for me so much. It frightens me."

Margaret laid down her pen.

"I wonder if it would help you, Sissy, if I told you a little about myself. I was not in love with Malcolm when I married him. He was a brother-officer of my father's, and when I knew him first I never thought of him in any other light. I was a dreamy, romantic girl, an only child, and motherless, and over head and ears in love with a man whom I thank God from the bottom of my heart that I was not permitted to marry. He had a charm no woman could resist, and, to do him justice, I think he cared for me as much as it was in him to care for any one. But he was utterly worthless, and mercifully I found it out before it was too late. I could not believe it at first, but it was made too clear for doubt. Our engagement was broken off, and I was very ill—so ill they did not think I could recover. Just as I began

to get better, my father died, very suddenly, and left Malcolm my guardian. I was alone in the world, with no near relatives or friends. Malcolm took me to stay with an old aunt of his at Edinburgh, but I was not very happy. She was not accustomed to young people, and had fidgety ways; and, though I tried my best, I found her hard to please. Malcolm saw it—he used to pay me flying visits, to see how I was getting on—and one day he asked me if I could put up with a man old enough to be my father. I was taken by surprise, but he had been so good to me I could not bear to give him pain, and I consented. Little by little I learned to love him, and now,” her eyes shining, “I could say, with Shakespeare, ‘Down on your knees and thank Heaven, fasting, for a good man’s love.’ ”

She ceased. It had cost her something to draw the veil from the past, even to Sissy, but if her own experience, bitter as it had been, could save her friend from making a mistake, she would not hesitate.

"Thank you, Margaret," said Sissy at length. "It is good of you to tell me."

But she was not convinced. She knew that Margaret was happy in her marriage, and the Colonel was a good man. But you could not compare this calm affection, founded on esteem and duty, with the spontaneous, involuntary surrender of the heart "unasked, unsought," which it thrilled her even now to remember. Yet, after all, most people have to be content with a second best, and why should she be more fortunate than the rest?

The next day was Christmas eve. Sissy and Margaret were busy all the morning, preparing the crib and decorating the altar with flowers. For they were to have midnight Mass, a great privilege, granted to the family because the Squire had built the church in the village. The crib was a great joy to little Cecil Fraser. He wanted to have the *Bambino* to play with, but Margaret explained to him that he must only look, not touch. The priest arrived in the

afternoon to hear confessions—a delicate-looking young man, with a cough, who found the Northern winters trying. But Margaret thought he had the face of a saint as he knelt at the altar for a few moments of prayer and recollection before going into the confessional.

They dined rather earlier than usual, and after dinner the old people retired to rest for two or three hours. But Sissy and Margaret preferred to sit up. They read and worked, and said the rosary together, and were at hand in case anything should be wanted. At nine o'clock the priest's sister arrived, and Sissy went out into the hall to greet her. She had been unable to come up sooner, having things to see to for the next day. She also, by Sissy's advice, went up to rest before the Mass began, and Sissy rejoined her friend in the drawing-room.

"That is a wonderful girl," she said. "She makes all her own dresses—and so well, too, you will see—and does all the work of the presbytery with a rough girl under her.

She was brought up in one of those Belgian convents where they teach them all sorts of useful things."

"Her voice sounded nice, I thought, when she was talking to you," said Margaret.

"She is—very nice. We are lucky to have her. She is a great help to me. She knows all about everything and everybody. It is rather touching. She came up here to look after her brother, who is not at all strong. Their father has married again, and they are the only two of the first family. She is devoted to him."

Sissy was again summoned away, and Margaret took up a book that lay on the table, containing a number of quaint old-fashioned prints of the country-houses belonging to the Catholic gentry throughout England. She was soon absorbed in its perusal.

"You can not think, Sissy," she exclaimed, looking up as her friend came in and knelt by her side, "how all this interests me. You are accustomed to it, of course, but to me it is

wonderful to be here, in the midst of this old Catholic family which has kept the Faith and continued the old traditions through ages of persecution and now through worse than persecution, the indifference and want of belief of modern times. Don't you feel it an honor to belong to it?"

"Of course I do, Margaret. But, as you say, I am accustomed to it. Not that I feel it any the less for that, but it is deeper down."

"Beyond expression," said Margaret softly. "Yes, I understand that."

A little before midnight the bell began to ring out over the silent country. Snow lay thickly on the ground without, but it was beautifully warm in the chapel, where the little band of worshipers gathered together in the middle of the night, to celebrate the coming of their Lord. It was all new to Margaret; she had never assisted at midnight Mass before, and followed everything with the closest attention. The priest came in and Mass began, a Low Mass, but at the

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Offertory the strains of the *Adeste Fideles* floated out on the air.

“What a beautiful voice—like an angel’s!” whispered Margaret, entranced. “Who is it?”

“Miss Matheson, the priest’s sister,” answered Sissy under her breath.

Mass over, Sissy remained for a while on her knees, her face buried in her hands; then, rising, led the way to the dining-room, where hot coffee and chocolate awaited them. She presented Miss Matheson to Margaret.

“But where is Father Matheson?” asked Margaret, looking round. “Isn’t he going to have anything?”

“He can not,” answered Sissy. “He has to say Mass at the village in the morning.”

“Another Mass?”

“Two, one at eight and one at eleven. Every priest usually says three Masses on Christmas Day.”

“But it is enough to kill him!” cried Margaret, horrified.

Miss Matheson laughed merrily.

“Oh, no! Our priests are accustomed to that. What would the poor country people do without their Mass? He has gone to rest now, and Mrs. Wharton is kind enough to send us back in the carriage.”

Margaret felt with humility that though she had been three years a Catholic, she still had much to learn.

Christmas Day passed quietly at Wharton. Most people's thoughts were busy with the absent, and wondering what sort of Christmas cheer they were having out there.

“They say Buller feeds his men well,” observed Margaret, “and that is why they follow him so willingly. The way to a man's heart, you know, Mrs. Wharton. But I must say I have always thought it must be extra hard to fight on an empty stomach.”

The formation of the Imperial Yeomanry had been announced, and many young men on the estate had enlisted the previous day, and were following “Mr. Charlie” to the wars, with no lack of generous gifts from the Squire and his wife, to help them on their

way. This threw a shadow over the usual Christmas festivities. But if the older people took their pleasure quietly, it was a field-day for Margaret's boy, who got presents all round, and was allowed to have his mid-day dinner downstairs and tea in the drawing-room. Here he sat surrounded by his toys, and slightly out of hand, as his nurse found when she came to summon him to bed.

"Now, Master Cecil, dear," she began, but he turned his back on her.

"Baby busy," he said in an important voice, arranging his toys.

"Baby, dear, go at once when Nannie calls you," said Margaret.

Her soft voice was not raised, but the child scrambled obediently to his feet, and went round, saying good night to every one.

"By George!" said the Squire, as the door closed behind him. "You have trained him well. Military discipline already."

"Don't you think I am right?" asked Margaret anxiously. "It will save him so much

trouble in the future if he learns to obey without argument."

"Quite right. But how do you manage to do it? For the young man has a will of his own."

"He knows I mean what I say."

CHAPTER XV

SPION KOP

SISSY went up to London with Margaret at the beginning of January. She found the little Kensington flat very pleasant. It was high up, but there was an elevator, and the view was delightful. She could see right over the south of London, with the different towers and churches standing out like landmarks. It was like a doll's house after Wharton, but the rooms were daintily furnished and very cozy. Not long after her arrival she got a letter from Maxwell, written on the eve of the Battle of Colenso.

"We are in front of Colenso and give battle to-morrow. You will know long before you get this what has happened. I am not very hopeful, but it will be a comfort to be doing something. Day after day we hear

the guns from Ladysmith calling to us for help. The difficulties are enormous; the Boers hold every position. But the General will never give up till he has accomplished his task."

It was very exciting to be in London after the quiet of Wharton. Sissy grew to understand how people loved the great city, with its teeming pulse of life. News was coming all day long. They seemed to be living in the midst of the war. Directly any fresh event occurred, pink and green papers appeared, fluttering along the street, damp from the press, and were eagerly bought up by the hurrying passers-by, each occupied with his own business, yet yielding to the master-thought which dominated all. At night Sissy used to lie awake, listening to the cries of the newspaper boys in the road below, with "Latest news from the front," but Margaret told her it was often incorrect, and that it was better to wait for more reliable information in the morning. Coming in to breakfast one day on her return from

Mass at the Carmelite church round the corner, Sissy found Margaret, the newspaper in her hand, in a state of great indignation.

“Read that,” she exclaimed. “Those insolent papers!” and handed her the sheet.

Sissy read it, and broke into a ripple of laughter.

“I can’t help it, Margaret. Don’t be vexed. But it really *is* true—and funny. ‘General Buller has again crossed the Tugela; but, with his usual foresight, has taken a return ticket.’ ”

But Margaret refused to be pacified.

The next day brought a letter from Charlie.

“We are gathering up strength for another attempt. This time I think we shall succeed. It won’t be our fault if we don’t. It is a great sight to see our Catholic men going to confession the night before a battle. Every one is impressed by the faith of the men and the courage of the padres. You should see the chaplains going unarmed through the thick of the fight, to give absolu-

tion to a dying man. It makes one proud to be a Catholic. Here is a story you will like: Jack Macdonald fell mortally wounded in the last battle beside his chum, Harry Ommaney. 'For God's sake, Harry,' he gasped, 'get me a priest.' Harry looked across the field. The bullets were falling like hail, ping-ping—such a nasty sound—and as he told me afterward he didn't much like it. 'The other fellows were afraid of death, Charlie,' he said, 'but I was afraid of hell.' You see, old Harry had led a bit of a gay life, and had put off going to the Sacraments when he had the chance. But he went, found the priest, and pointed out to him where Jack lay.

" 'That is all right, my son,' said the padre, 'but you must come and show me the way.'

" 'I can't, Father,' said Harry. 'I have been across once—I am not in a fit state to die.'

" 'God will take care of that,' said the priest. 'You must come.'

"So they started off across the fiery zone

and got there in time. Poor old Jack made his peace with God, and died with a smile on his face."

The Government had a contract with the omnibus proprietors, paying them a subsidy on condition of a certain number of their horses being available in time of war. The big, strong animals were now called upon for use; and after three-weeks' rest on board ship, arrived at Cape Town in splendid condition. But when they were harnessed to the guns a serious difficulty arose. They were accustomed to wood pavements and macadamized streets, and had no experience of the heavy going of the African veldt. It was impossible to get them to move. In this dilemma one of the City Imperial Volunteers, who had been a 'bus conductor, rushed forward.

"'Ere, sir," he called out, "I'll manage 'em."

And, getting behind them, he shouted out:
"'Pool Street—Benk—penny all the way
—'igher up—'igher up."

And higher up they went, obedient to the well-known voice of command.

Sissy was in one of the big shops when the news came of the ascent of Spion Kop and its occupation by our troops. Some one rushed in with the tidings. All buying and selling stopped immediately, and every one began talking at once. A girl who knew Sissy slightly rushed up to her and wrung her hand.

“Oh, Miss Wharton!” she exclaimed, “you have a brother out there, haven’t you?”

Her own *fiancé* was in the attack. Poor girl! the next day brought the news of the evacuation, and her *fiancé’s* name was in the list of the killed. That brought the realities of war very near to Sissy, but worse was to come, more personal, and touching her more closely. She had gone out on an errand for Margaret, who was not very well; and, on her return, was met by the nurse, her eyes red with crying.

“Oh, Miss Wharton!” she exclaimed.

"There is a telegram from the War Office. Colonel Fraser is dead!"

"Where is Mrs. Fraser?"

"In her room—but she said she wished to be alone."

"She will see me," said Sissy, opening the bed-room door and going in. After a few minutes she came out again, looking disturbed and anxious.

"Where is Master Cecil, nurse? Come, baby, dear."

And, taking the child in her arms, she carried him in to his mother. At the sight of him, Margaret's composure suddenly gave way.

"Oh, Sissy!" she cried. "My fatherless boy!"

And, straining him to her heart, she burst into a passion of tears. The child was frightened.

"Why mummy cry?" he asked. "Aunt Sissy, why mummy cry?"

"Because she is sorry, darling," answered

Sissy as well as she could, trying to steady her voice. "Love her, baby dear."

He put his little fat arms obediently round his mother's neck, and Sissy stole away, feeling she had left Margaret her best consolation. She went off to find the nurse and to ask what the telegram had said.

"Mrs. Fraser has it, miss. But she told me the Colonel was killed in the moment of victory, leading his men. She was quite calm when she read it out."

"Yes, I know. She frightened me," answered Sissy. "But I think she will be better now."

The burst of weeping left Margaret exhausted, but with a more natural sorrow than the first stunned horror of realization. Sissy slept in her friend's room that night; she would not leave her alone. The touch of her hand was warm and comforting. In the silent watches she told Margaret of the Colonel's last words to her at Larchester before his departure.

"How good of him! How like him!" uttered Margaret brokenly. "It is a great trust. God help me to be faithful to it!"

Presently she spoke again.

"I don't think death had any terrors for him. His faith was a very simple one. He believed in his Saviour. My father was the same. I have often seen soldiers like that. They meet death so often, they cease to fear it."

It was hard when, two days afterward, they heard the joy-bells ringing out from every church tower for the relief of Ladysmith, knowing what precious lives had been sacrificed in the attempt. If only he had lived to see it! But he had died a soldier's death, the death he would have chosen, at the head of his men. Sissy's heart was sore with regret for the friend she had lost, and she knew how Charlie would grieve for his kind chief. Two other colonels had been killed in the same engagement, and the total loss of life was very great. But the day was won, and the back of the Boer resistance broken

at last. The next day brought Sissy an urgent summons to return to Wharton. Her grandmother was down with influenza, and they feared pneumonia. She clung to her friend, hardly able to tear herself away.

"I can not bear to leave you, Margaret," she kept repeating. "But I must go."

"Of course you must, dear," answered Margaret, kissing her.

Perhaps it is as well we do not always know the thoughts of even our best friends. Sissy's departure was almost a relief to Margaret, though she would not for worlds have let the girl suspect it. She had been an angel of consolation, but after the first few hours Margaret wanted to be alone, to be silent and think and pray, to rearrange the life so suddenly broken. She had a curious fancy that the spirit of her dead husband was hovering near her, that loyal, unselfish spirit that had been her stay and comfort in the saddest hours of her life. How patient he had been with her in those days which she could not bear to look back upon, days of

shame and bitterness, when she had lost the illusions of youth and learned to look with distrust upon life. It had taken her long months to live it down, and perhaps it was not till her baby was laid in her arms that the last shadow had passed away.

But this, though deep and sincere, was a peaceful sorrow. It was the hand of God, not of man. There was no sting in it. She had nothing to reproach herself with, and how many of us can say as much when those we care for are taken from us? She had been a true and loving wife to the gallant gentleman who had given her his heart. Even her change of religion had brought no division between them. He had recognized her right to follow the dictates of her conscience; and, though she would have given worlds if he could have shared in the revelation that had given new beauty and meaning to her life, she knew that he was in good faith and that he acted up to the light that was in him.

The Colonel's will left Margaret execu-

trix and sole guardian of her boy. He knew that her dreamy, poetic nature was balanced by sound common sense. She was soon busy with lawyers and investments, some of which needed to be changed, but the months of her husband's absence had taught her self-reliance, and she adapted herself without much difficulty to the new conditions of her life. She had her boy's interests to consider, and that awoke a wisdom and foresight which she might have lacked on her own account. It was not for some time afterward that details reached her of her husband's death in that last wild dash for the hills behind which lay Ladysmith. Charlie was behind him when he fell, and rushed to his assistance.

"Leave me, my boy," he said. "I am done for. Your country wants you."

Charlie lingered to place him under the shadow of a rock with his water bottle within reach, and tore on to rejoin his men. But already the Boers were flying in all directions, and it was not long before he was able to return, and found the Colonel still

alive, but with his moments numbered. He pressed Charlie's hand feebly.

"Margaret, my dear love to her!" he murmured. "The boy—Sissy knows."

Then his eyes closed, a look of great peace came over his face, and his spirit passed away. "One of the best," so Charlie wrote to Sissy. "The men are broken-hearted. He was a father and a friend to them all."

Mrs. Wharton was very ill indeed, as Sissy found on arriving, so ill that for some days her life was almost despaired of. Two Bon Secour nuns were sent for from Liverpool, and Sissy and her old nurse took turns in watching beside her, for Mrs. Wharton clung to those she knew, and could not bear to be left with strangers, however kind and skilful. Then, quite suddenly, she took a turn for the better. It is strange how these frail people, whose hold on life seems so uncertain, recover, while the strong ones die. Each day brought some fresh improvement, the Bon Secour nuns went back to their convent, and Nana slept in Mrs. Wharton's

dressing-room with the door open between; but, beyond getting up once or twice in the night to see to the fire, she was not much disturbed. Sissy was resting on the sofa in her bed-room when Nana came in with a yellow envelope in her hand.

"A telegram for you, Miss Sissy," she said, and waited to hear the news, for in those days telegrams were alarming visitants.

Sissy tore it open, read it, and put her hand to her forehead with a bewildered expression.

"I don't understand," she said. "It is from Major Maxwell. 'Charlie going on well. No cause for anxiety.' Has the newspaper come?"

"Just come, Miss Sissy. Shall I fetch it?"

"If you would, dear Nana."

Nana hurried away, and returned almost breathless with the paper in her hand. Sissy snatched it from her.

"Yes, here it is. 'Lieutenant Charles

George Wharton severely wounded.' Oh, Nana!" turning very pale, and letting the paper fall to the ground.

"Now don't take on, Miss Sissy dear," exclaimed her nurse, kneeling down beside her and taking her hand. "The Major says, 'No cause for anxiety.' And very thoughtful it was of him to telegraph."

"He knew I would see it—yes, it was very kind," said Sissy, with a little self-reproach. But she could not think of Maxwell then. Her thoughts were taken up with Charlie.

"I must write to Mrs. Fraser at once. She may be able to get some later news."

"And the Squire, Miss Sissy?" ventured Nana. "The post doesn't go out till two o'clock."

"You are right, Nana. I must go to him first."

The Squire was much upset, and in soothing his fears Sissy insensibly calmed her own. She knew she could trust Maxwell to tell her the truth. And Charlie was with him evidently, that was one comfort. But she wrote

a hasty note to Margaret by the early post, begging her to go to the War Office and make inquiries, and let her know as soon as possible.

The next morning she drove into Carnston, to get some things from the drug-store for Mrs. Wharton. She knew she could not hear from Margaret till the afternoon. It was their nearest town, only three miles off, whereas Larchester was ten, which was a consideration. Consequently, Sissy did most of her petty shopping in Carnston, which was a small town, but rather an important junction. Coming out of a shop she met Mary Roche, who had seen the notice in the paper, and came up to inquire about Charlie. Sissy greeted her warmly; she had always liked this cousin of hers, with her plain face and honest nature. She told her all she knew, and added:

“I am expecting a telegram from Mrs. Fraser. She will get the latest information in town.”

“Poor Sissy, you must be anxious,” said

Mary kindly. "But I am sure he will be all right; and, at any rate, now he is wounded, he won't run any more risks."

This was a new way of looking at it. Sissy could not help smiling.

"You know," continued Mary, "Philip wanted to volunteer, but he did not dare leave Eleanor. I should have gone if I had been he. He can do no good here. She will drag his name in the dirt before she has done. As it is, she is ruining him by her extravagance."

"Can nothing be done?" asked Sissy in a low voice.

"Nothing. Philip is afraid of her. If he says a word she is insolent. She is always throwing you in his teeth. It was a long time before he heard the last of his going over to see you when his mother died. The best thing that could happen to Eleanor would be to lose her looks."

Sissy uttered an exclamation.

"Oh! I know it sounds horrid to say so, but better her body than her soul. Half

measures are no use with Eleanor. You must strike—and strike hard—as I told you long ago. She never sees her child—the dearest little girl, Sissy, with such winning ways. Any mother would be proud of her.”

“And Philip? Does he care for her?”

“Oh, *he* is fond of her, and she adores him. Poor little soul!”

“She has you, at any rate, Mary,” said Sissy affectionately.

“I am not much. But I do what I can. Well, good-by, Sissy, I am glad to have seen you. I wish we could meet sometimes.”

“Why shouldn’t we?” exclaimed Sissy impulsively. “Why don’t you come and see me?”

“I didn’t think you would like it.”

“But I should. You are not responsible—and it is all so long ago.”

Mary promised to come, and Sissy drove away with a heavy heart, and the old aching longing to comfort the man who had spoiled his own life even more than hers.

CHAPTER XVI

HOME-COMING

CHARLIE was invalided home as soon as he was well enough to be moved. Sissy went to meet him at Southhampton with very different feelings from her last expedition. Her grandmother was well enough now to be left, and she spent the night in London with Margaret, who arranged to send her nurse out to sleep and take the boy into her own room in order to put up her friends the next day. It would be pleasanter for them, she thought, than going to a hotel, and the journey up to the North without a break would be too fatiguing for Charlie. Fever had set in after his wound, and he had been very ill, but they hoped the journey on board ship would set him up.

Sissy went down by an early morning train, and found herself one of many eagerly awaiting the arrival of the steamer. It

came in at last, the deck crowded with passengers, among whom Sissy eagerly strained her eyes to distinguish her brother. She caught sight of him at length, standing a little apart, in a very shabby uniform, looking very pale and thin, with his arm in a sling. He waved to her, and in a few minutes they were clasped in each other's arms, and the months of suspense and anxiety were forgotten.

"Oh! Charlie, how ill you look!" cried Sissy, lifting her head and gazing at him with wet eyes. "And how thin you have grown!"

"It's all right, old lady," he answered. "I'm pounds better than I was. You should have seen me a month ago."

"And your arm. Can you use it?"

"Not yet; you will have to cut up my dinner for me."

Soon they were in the train, speeding up to town through the beautiful, smiling country. The blossoms were out, and the landscape looked like a garden. Charlie leaned out of the window, drinking it in with delight.

"How peaceful it looks!" he exclaimed. "How safe! What a change from the veldt. Thank God for old England! Sissy, you don't know what scenes I have been through. War is a ghastly thing."

He shuddered.

"Don't think of it," said Sissy anxiously. "It is over now."

"Not yet. But the worst of it is, I hope. Bad luck, though, to have been wounded like this. I wanted to be in at the death."

"You have done quite enough," declared Sissy—"Captain Wharton, D. S. O. Wait till you see what a reception you get at home."

"It will be all owing to Maxwell if I do," said Charlie; "I shouldn't be here now but for him."

"Why? What did he do?"

"Didn't he tell you? I might have guessed as much. Dragged me out from under the horse's heels, and cut down the fellow who was going to make an end of me. I hope you are going to be nice to him, Sissy."

"Indeed, Charlie, I will do my best," she answered earnestly.

Margaret was waiting at the door of the flat to receive them, fair and tall in her deep mourning, her boy clinging to her skirts. Charlie felt a sudden lump in his throat; he stooped down hastily and kissed the child, muttering: "Poor little chap!" under his breath.

"You must be tired," said Margaret, leading the way to the drawing-room. "Captain Wharton, if you will take my advice, you will lie down and rest before dinner."

"*Please*, Mrs. Fraser, not Captain Wharton," uttered Charlie, turning very red.

"Charlie, then," smiling at him with a sweet graciousness that yet seemed to leave him at an immeasurable distance from her. Her recent loss hedged her round with a barrier that inspired the young man with reverence and awe. Yet, after dinner when Sissy left them alone together, knowing Margaret had many questions to ask him, he grew more at his ease. His manner was full of defer-

ence for his Colonel's widow, but they met on common ground; and, after she had heard all he could tell her about her husband, she led him on to talk about himself and Maxwell, and the regiment Colonel Fraser had commanded so long. She listened with eager attention, and Charlie, warming to his theme, grew graphic in his descriptions. When Sissy returned she found that all stiffness had vanished, and they were on the high road to friendship.

"I think you should go to bed now, Charlie dear," said his sister. "Your man is waiting to help you."

Charlie had picked up a servant at Cape Town, being unable to do much for himself, and had brought him along with him. The porter had found a room for him below. Sissy came back when the man had retired, and stood talking to her brother, who was too excited to sleep. Suddenly they heard a sound in the distance, like the roaring of the sea.

"Charlie! What is that?" cried Sissy.

"It sounds like cheering," listening eagerly. "Something has happened. Good news, at any rate."

"The barracks are just below," she exclaimed. "I believe Mafeking is relieved."

It was the twelfth of May, and all London had been hanging breathless for days on the fate of the gallant little garrison, half-starving, as every one thought; though, in truth, their sufferings were not as great as those at Ladysmith. For half an hour the noise went on, then suddenly came cries in the road below: "Relief of Mafeking! Mafeking relieved!"

"I must have a paper," cried Sissy.

And, throwing on a cape, she opened the door of the flat and ran downstairs to the street, where she found a little crowd already assembled, and papers being bought up as fast as they could be sold. With great difficulty she secured one, and hurried back, first going in to read the news to Charlie, and then taking the paper to Margaret, who was impatiently awaiting her turn.

"Thank God for that!" said Charlie when his sister rejoined him. "That is good news to meet one on one's return."

The country went wild the next day, and perhaps got a little foolish, but the strain had been very great, and the relief was proportionate. All along the line traveling up North were signs of rejoicing, church bells ringing in every town and village, people gathered in little knots at the railway stations eagerly discussing the news. When Sissy and Charlie got out at Carnston, they found a little crowd of friends and neighbors waiting for them on the platform, and it was with difficulty they tore themselves away. A triumphal arch had been erected in the village for them to pass under, and at the lodge gates a number of the tenants had assembled, who insisted on taking the horses out of the carriage and dragging it up to the house. There was quite a gathering of people on the terrace—men, women, and children. The old Squire came hurrying out.

“Welcome, Charlie, my boy! Welcome home!”

“Three cheers for the Captain! Three cheers for the young Squire!” shouted the men.

This finished Charlie. He broke down and ran indoors, leaving Sissy to reply to the hearty congratulations that were showered on her from every side. But Charlie soon recovered, and came out to take his share. He shook hands with everybody with his left hand and thanked them.

“I am very lucky,” he said, “to be back among you all, when so many brave fellows have left their bones out there.”

“None braver than you, sir,” called out a voice in the crowd. “You are one of the old stock, and we are proud of you.”

The people slowly dispersed, with many audible and flattering remarks.

“There they go,” said one old woman as Charlie and Sissy disappeared into the house. “A bonny pair, and as like as two pins.”

Charlie went in to his grandmother, to be

kissed and blessed and cried over. He found her sadly altered, greatly to his concern. She had failed very much since her illness. Charlie had always been greatly attached to her. Gentle as she was, she had plenty of spirit and dignity, and had exercised a controlling influence over the Squire's irascible moods.

Charlie himself had changed a good deal in the months of his absence. The scenes he had gone through had left their mark on him; he had grown older and graver; he was no longer a boy, but a man. Every one recognized this; the Squire leaned on him and consulted him about everything, and the management of the estate passed more and more into his hands.

The twins were overwhelmed with invitations. Every one wanted to meet the wounded hero, one of the first to return from the war. His pallor, the arm he carried in a sling, made him most interesting. All the girls were ready to lose their hearts to him. He had numerous flirtations, but emerged

from them unscathed, and Sissy began to wonder if he had come across any one while he was away who had made an impression on him. But he denied it when she asked him.

“No, Sis,” he answered. “I haven’t met any one yet I like as well as you. It *is* jolly, old girl, to be together again.”

He put his hand affectionately on her arm. They were coming home from a garden party, at which they had been the guests of honor, and Sissy was driving, for Charlie was still, to all intents and purposes, a one-armed man, though his general health was improving in the clean, pure air of his native county. But he was subject to attacks of fever which incapacitated him for days, though between whiles he managed to enjoy life all the more for these interruptions.

“Shall we drive round by Carnston,” suggested Sissy, “and get a paper?”

Charlie assented. As they came into the town, they noticed signs of excitement, and flags flying over the bank.

"What is it?" asked Sissy eagerly, pulling up and addressing a group of workmen.

"Pretoria, ma'am. We have entered Pretoria. The news has just come."

Charlie threw his hat in the air.

"Then the war is over," cried Sissy.

"Not yet, Sissy. The Boer is a tenacious fellow, and will give us some trouble yet. But the news is great. Lord, I wish I had been there!"

They could talk of nothing else going home. Charlie was wrought up, and his warlike instincts aroused. After dinner he drew his chair up to his grandmother's sofa, and told her story after story of the campaign; of Blundell, of the Guards, shot dead by a wounded Boer to whom he was offering his water bottle; of Major Childe who, like many others, had a strange presentiment of his coming death the night before the battle in which he was killed, and wrote out his own epitaph, which he begged might be put on his grave: "Is it well with the Child? It is well"; and many others. She was quite

happy listening to her beloved grandson.

“All the same, my darling,” she said when he again expressed his regret at not being there for the finish, “I am thankful to have you safe at home.”

When she had gone up to bed, he strolled out on the terrace with Sissy to enjoy the beautiful summer night.

“Strange things happen in war,” he said, following out his train of thought. “There was a fellow in the Imperial Light Horse. He was sent to accompany the wagons containing the sick and wounded. The plain looked perfectly clear as far as the eye could reach. Part of our troops were on ahead, the rest bringing up the rear. But the Boers, three hundred of them, were lying in ambush in a little dip through which the wagons had to pass; and, as they came up, the Boers took possession of them, we behind suspecting nothing. But this fellow gave the alarm. He fired his carbine into the midst of them, and was instantly shot down. It saved the following column. After the

fight was over, his body was brought in, and, as there was no one else to do it, I went through his papers, in case there was anything that ought to be sent to his relatives. Among them I found this."

He took out a pocketbook and produced a photograph.

"Margaret!" exclaimed Sissy. "Before she married, I suppose."

"I took possession of it. I didn't want Mrs. Fraser's photograph kicking about, for strangers to make remarks on. Do you know anything about it, Sissy?"

"Yes, I think I do," she answered slowly. "What was his name?"

"Masters—at least so he called himself, but I don't believe it was his real name. I fancy he had rather a shady past, which he was glad to bury. There were lots of such fellows out there, but he was a brave man—one of the bravest."

Sissy said nothing. She was thinking how strange it was that Charlie should have come across the end of that story. He did not ask

her, nor did she volunteer any explanation. She put away the photograph when she went up to her room, and deliberated whether she should write and tell Margaret, but decided she would wait till she saw her. She was coming up to stay with them next month. It would be time enough then.

Margaret arrived at Wharton in time for the haymaking, much to Master Cecil's delight. He rode on the top of the cart, held firmly in place by one of the farm-hands, and buried Charlie under a haycock with great glee. They had a few very hot days, which reminded Charlie of South Africa, when they were content to sit about and do nothing. But the nights were always cool. One day they went on an expedition to the Lakes. It seemed a pity not to take advantage of the lovely weather. They started very early in the morning, before the heat of the day, while the mists still lay on the distant hills. They took the train at Scarsdale, just below, and crossed the bay. To Sissy and Charlie, of course, every inch of the ground was fa-

miliar, but Margaret was enchanted with the scenery. She was much taken with Granby, the little seaside town that lay on the sands on the opposite side of the bay, nestling under the hill, and so mild and sheltered that invalids were sent there for the winter.

"I have a great mind, Sissy," she said, "to take a house here for the winter months. The lease of my flat is up in October."

"I wish you would, Margaret," exclaimed Sissy. "It would be delightful to have you so near."

"Do, Mrs. Fraser," said Charlie eagerly.

Margaret smiled at them. It was nice to feel they wanted her. And at Ulverstone, where they changed trains, and Charlie went off to talk to the station-master while they waited for the next one, she said so to Sissy.

"One feels rather lonely at times," she observed with a sigh.

"Dearest," cried Sissy impetuously, "you have me always. And Charlie is devoted to you."

"He is a dear fellow," said Margaret warmly. "He is so good to baby. It makes my heart go out to him. How do you think he is, Sissy? He looks very delicate still."

"He is better, I think," answered Sissy. "He does not get fever so often. His arm still troubles him a good deal, but they say that will be all right."

Charlie rejoined them as the train came in, and they went on to Lakeside, where they took the steamer up the lake. It was a perfect day on the water. At first the landscape was rather tame, but smiling and pleasant, with gentle slopes and trees coming down to the water's edge. At Bowness they found a regatta going on, bands playing, the landing-stage crowded with people, and gay little craft darting about in every direction. It looked so bright and lively, like a foreign place, it was hard to believe one's self in the rugged North.

"There's nothing to beat our lakes in fine

weather," declared Charlie, "but wait till you get a fortnight's rain, and it is another matter."

Now they were nearing the upper part of the lake, and the scenery grew wilder and more severe, but far more interesting. The water broadened out, and lost its riverlike appearance, and dark mountains shut in the view. They got out at Ambleside and walked up the steep little street to the inn. Here, as elsewhere, Charlie attracted a good deal of attention. The coffee-room was crowded with tourists, and the landlord, an old acquaintance, came up and offered them a private room, but they declined with thanks. It was far more amusing to watch and listen. The visitors were chiefly Americans, who know our country far better than we do ourselves, and had read up their subject beforehand. Sissy was put to shame by their accurate knowledge. Most of them were starting off on a two- or three-days' tour in the district, with copies of the Lake poets in their pockets.

Coming back, Sissy persuaded Charlie to go and lie down in the cabin and sleep a little. It was a long day for him. They had the little steamer almost to themselves; it was like being in their own yacht. As the afternoon waned, it grew chilly, and they were glad of their wraps. Margaret and Sissy leaned over the side, talking and watching the light on the water and the lengthening shadows on land. It was an hour for confidences. Sissy drew near to her friend.

"Margaret," she said, "I have something to show you."

She drew out the photograph. Margaret started.

"Sissy!" she exclaimed. "Where did you get this?"

"From Charlie." And she told her the story.

The tears stood in Margaret's eyes.

"I never dreamed he had kept it. How it brings things back! Poor fellow!"

She lapsed into silence. Sissy felt intuitively that she would rather be alone, and

walked to the other end of the deck. When she came back again, Margaret's face had resumed its usual serene expression, but the photograph had disappeared.

CHAPTER XVII

“O RARE, PALE MARGARET!”

OLD Mr. and Mrs. Wharton died within a week of each other. It was the Squire, after all, who was the first to go. He was found dead one morning in his chair in the study, with a peaceful look on his face, as though death had come to him like a friend long-expected, and who needed to give no notice of his approach. A few days later Sissy closed her grandmother's eyes, and kissed her forehead, wondering at the calm beauty of the marble features. Every trace of age and sorrow was smoothed away, but it was the face of a statue, not the familiar one which Sissy was used to seeing every day.

Charlie now reigned at the Hall, and people began to wonder when he would give it a mistress. He seemed in no hurry. He

and Sissy were very happy together. They spent much of their time at Granby, where Margaret had taken a pretty little house quite close to the sea. There was always some excuse of game, or fruit, or the last new book, and the distance was so short, just across the bay. More than once Sissy, going over unexpectedly, found Charlie in possession, looking very much at home, and wondered a little that he had not told her of his intention, but was too happy at their being such good friends to make any remark. So the winter months went quietly by. A guerrilla warfare was going on in South Africa. Maxwell was busy chasing De Wet, and chafing at his enforced absence. He could not expect Sissy to wait forever. But Charlie wrote, and told him that it was all right; he need not worry; she gave no encouragement to any one else. So he tried to possess his soul in patience.

One day Sissy, going over her brother's papers, and trying to reduce them to order, found something hidden away at the back of

the drawer, which gave her food for thought. It was a little pet ornament of Margaret's which had been missing some time, and which she had been very vexed at losing. How did it come there? How strange of Charlie! And then a light suddenly broke upon her mind. Was it—could it be possible that he was beginning to care for her in that way? And, if so, what chance was there of his love being returned? She determined to watch and observe.

“ ’Twas Eastertide, the feast of gladness.” Margaret had come over to spend the bank holiday at Wharton with her boy, and avoid the crowd of “trippers” with which Granby, like every other seaside place along the coast, was flooded. The year of deep mourning was over; she had discarded her heavy weeds, and wore a pretty black dress with a touch of white at the throat, in which she looked very fair and lovely. Charlie's eyes followed her, as Sissy was quick to notice, but Margaret appeared quite unconscious. Sissy resolved to try an experiment.

"Margaret," she said suddenly at luncheon, "did you ever find that jet ornament you lost?"

"No, never. It is very annoying. I liked it so much."

Charlie changed color, and looked rather uncomfortable.

"You thought you lost it here, didn't you?"

"I *did* think so, but I must have been mistaken. One of your servants would have been sure to find it."

"*Some one* would have found it," said Sissy, with a curious significance in her tone.

Charlie looked up quickly and caught his sister's eye. They exchanged a long glance—of question on his side, of answer on hers. Then Sissy changed the conversation. But, after luncheon, when Margaret went up to put on her hat, Charlie waylaid his sister, who was about to follow her.

"Come in here, Sis," he said, opening the library door. "I want to speak to you."

She obeyed.

“What did you mean,” he demanded, “just now at luncheon?”

“I wanted to find out something, and I succeeded.”

“Then you know, Sissy! Do you think I have a chance?”

There was a ring of keen anxiety in his voice that it hurt her to hear.

“Charlie, my darling,” she exclaimed, “how do I know? I never thought of you two in that light. How do you feel about it yourself?”

“That she, like you, has never thought of it in that light,” he answered gloomily.

“She is older than you—”

“What does that matter?” impatiently. “She is the queen of women to me. I would serve her on my knees if she would let me.”

“Oh! my poor boy. Has it gone as far as that? And I never suspected it.”

“Hush! Here she is,” as he heard her step on the stairs. “Mind, not a word of this.”

“What do you take me for!” exclaimed Sissy indignantly.

But she was very anxious. She loved him so dearly, her twin, with whom her earliest recollections were intertwined, and would have done anything to secure his happiness. But this was beyond her power. She knew Margaret was fond of Charlie, but she was afraid that, from her standpoint of wife and mother, she looked upon him as a boy. Yet he had given proofs enough of manhood. How blind she had been! This had gone deep with Charlie, she was sure. His silence with her, to whom he was usually so communicative, showed it. Yet the ice once broken, it seemed a relief to him to confide in her. Sitting by the library fire that evening, after Margaret had left, he opened out.

"I did not like to tell you, Sissy. I thought you would think it too soon after the poor old Colonel's death. But, after all, it is more than a year ago," defending himself.

"When did you first begin to think about it?" she asked.

"When I first came home, I felt there was no one like her. I put away the thought.



“‘What is it, dear?’ she asked, stooping down. ‘What are you crying for?’”—Page 226.

It seemed like sacrilege. But when she came to live here, and I saw her so often—Sissy, no man could have helped it.”

“You must not hurry her,” answered Sissy. “You must give her time.”

“Not too much,” said Charlie, with decision. “Maxwell taught me a lesson.”

Sissy blushed rosy red.

The next day she drove over to call on some distant neighbors. She tried in vain to get Charlie to accompany her. They were dull people; but, after all, as Sissy said, one must be civil. Returning home, the road passed very near to Langton, and her pulses quickened. It was not often now that she came that way, which had once been so familiar. Just below was a little wood which she knew well, and which, at this time of year, was carpeted with wildflowers. A sound caught her ear, and she bent forward to listen. It was the voice of a crying child; and, as they turned the corner, she saw a little fair-haired girl sitting by the roadside, weeping bitterly. Sissy stopped the carriage, and got out.

"What is it, dear?" she asked, stooping down. "What are you crying for?"

A little tear-stained face was upraised to hers—a sweet little face that seemed, somehow, familiar.

"I am Dorothy Leigh. I am lost. Will you take me home?"

Dorothy Leigh! the name of Philip's dead mother—of the friend she had never ceased to mourn! This must be Philip's little daughter. What trick had fate in store for her now?

"Of course I will," she answered. "But why are you here alone? Where is your nurse?"

"I was naughty," said Dorothy, hanging her head. "I runned away. But I am good now. I won't do it again."

"That's right," said Sissy encouragingly. "Little girls shouldn't run away. Think how anxious your papa and mama must be."

"Mama is gone away—gone away for good," came the startling reply. "Nannie says she won't never come back any more,

and daddy wouldn't take her back if she did.”

The news took Sissy's breath away. Eleanor gone—gone, as the child's words implied, in some disgraceful fashion. She felt too stunned to speak.

“I'm glad she's gone,” continued the little girl. “I don't want her to come back.”

“Hush! child,” said Sissy instinctively. “You mustn't speak like that of your mother.”

“Nannie says she isn't like a mother to me. I heard her telling Annie. She slapped me because I spilled some water on her dress. I wish you were my mama,” nestling closer to Sissy, and slipping her little hand confidently in hers. “You are so pretty and so nice.”

Children's remarks are apt at times to be inconvenient to their elders. Sissy's color deepened.

“Come, little Dorothy,” she said, trying to hide her embarrassment, “I will drive you home.”

“Why do you call me Dorothy? That

is my Sunday name. I only use it when I say my catechism."

"What shall I call you, then?" asked Sissy, amused in spite of herself at the childish prattle.

"I am daddy's little Dolly," answered the child as if she were repeating a lesson.

A sudden mist dimmed Sissy's vision. Poor little Dolly! Poor little child, worse than motherless, left to servants' care and servants' gossip, who had never known a mother's love, and to whom the name of mother must henceforth be associated with shame and disgrace! With an impulsive movement she gathered her into her arms and kissed her. The child clung round her neck.

"I like you," she whispered, "I like you. I wish you could stay with me always."

Sissy set her gently down, and signaled to the carriage to approach. Dolly's attention was instantly distracted.

"Is that your carriage?" she exclaimed, dancing with delight. "Are you going to

drive me back? Oh, thank you so much! I have never been inside a carriage in my life.”

“What, not when you go away?”

“I never go away. Papa and mama go away, but I stay here.”

Sissy’s heart swelled again with indignant pity, but she made no remark.

“To Langton Hall,” she said, stepping into the carriage.

The footman touched his hat. He was too well-trained to show any surprise, but it may be imagined what comments passed between him and the coachman when he climbed upon the box. How many years was it since that direction had been given?

Sissy leaned back in the carriage, absorbed in the same thought. But little Dolly sat bolt upright, anxious that every one they passed should see her. She was a pretty child, with the regular features and fair coloring of the Leighs. They reached the Hall; the door flew open, and the butler, an old family servant who knew Sissy well, came hurrying out.

"Miss Dolly! Thank God! Mrs. Masham has been nearly wild about you."

"I am all right, May," said Dolly, with dignity. "This lady found me, and brought me home."

"But it was very naughty of you, missy, to give so much trouble. The men have been hunting for you in all directions. You should think of your poor papa."

"Good-by, Dolly," said Sissy, holding out her hand.

"Won't you step into the library, ma'am, and see Sir Philip?" suggested the butler. "He would like to thank you, I'm sure."

Sissy hesitated.

"If I might make so bold, ma'am," lowering his voice, "I think it might do him good. He hasn't spoken nor touched a thing since the morning."

Taking Dolly by the hand, she went.

Philip was seated beside the table in the window, his face buried in his hands. He had remained like that for hours without taking any notice of any one. The butler had

been in once or twice, and attempted to rouse him, but without success. Mary was away.

“Philip,” said Sissy, advancing into the room, “I have brought you back your little girl.”

He looked up, disclosing a face so wild, so haggard, that Sissy involuntarily shrank back. But Dolly, loosing her hold of Sissy’s hand, ran forward.

“Daddy,” she exclaimed, clambering on to his knee. “Won’t you thank the lady? May said you would like to. I was a naughty little girl. I runned away, and she brought me back in her beautiful carriage.”

“I don’t understand,” said Philip wearily, passing his hand over his forehead. “Were you lost? No one told me anything about it.”

Then, with a sudden start, as his eyes fell upon Sissy standing in the shadow of the doorway:

“You here, Sissy!” he exclaimed. “Have you come to see how amply you are avenged?”

She burst into tears. Her nerves were already shaken by all she had heard and seen, and this accusation gave the last blow to her self-control.

"Philip," she cried, "how can you think such a thing? I would give anything to undo what has happened. But I will leave you. I did wrong to come. My presence is only an intrusion."

She turned to go. Philip stopped her.

"Forgive me," he said. "I don't know what I said. My mind is dazed and bewildered, but I did not mean to give you pain. Did not the child say something about your having brought her back?"

"She found me crying in the road," said Dolly indignantly, "and she kissed me, and took my hand. It is very unkind of you, daddy, to make her cry when she was so good to me!"

"The child is right," observed Philip, looking down with the ghost of a smile on the flushed little champion by his side. "For-

give me, Sissy.” And, after an almost imperceptible pause, he added:

“You have heard?”

“I have heard,” she answered reluctantly. “Believe me, Philip, I am sorry from the bottom of my heart.”

“She has left me. And yet, Sissy,” rising and pacing the room with rapid, uneven steps, “even now if she returned to me I would forgive her and take her back.”

It was a weak confession, characteristic of the man, though Sissy, blinded with sorrow and compassion, did not see it. To forgive is noble, but to be willing to take her back showed him callous to every feeling of honor and self-respect. What security could he hope for in the future if he was so ready to condone the past? He had sunk back in his chair, oblivious apparently of Sissy's presence. There, in his ruined home, he sat, a miserable, broken-down man, disgraced among his fellows, a laughing-stock. The sight was more than Sissy could bear. She

stole out of the room and hurried away, pulling down her veil, to hide her emotion.

"Home," she said to the footman. "And shut the carriage, please."

She had no wish to expose her face to the curious observation of chance passers-by. Charlie was standing on the doorstep when she arrived, looking grave and shocked.

"This is a terrible business," he said, taking her arm and leading her into the garden.

"Yes, indeed," she answered.

"Cut off in her sins, without a moment for repentance."

"Good heavens! Charlie, what do you mean?"

"I thought you knew. I heard it in *Larchester*. It is in the second edition of to-day's paper. A railway accident on the line to Paris. Among the passengers Captain Trevor and Lady Leigh, killed instantly."

Sissy broke down completely.

"Oh, my poor Philip!" she sobbed; and for once Charlie failed to reprove her.

CHAPTER XVIII

CHARLIE'S MARRIAGE

MARY ROCHE was on a visit in Ireland. She hastened home as soon as she heard the awful news. The body of Eleanor—Lady Leigh—was brought home, and by Philip's directions was laid in the family vault. This, under the circumstances, excited comment; but, after all, it was Philip's own affair. Dolly was much pleased with her new black frock. Her nurse tried to explain to her that she wore it on account of her poor mama, but Dolly's childish mind failed to grasp the connection. She understood, however, that for some reason her mother's name must not be mentioned—above all, in her father's presence.

Mary came over to Wharton soon after the funeral, to see Sissy and thank her for

her kindness to Dolly. She was very much upset, and could hardly speak without crying. Sissy tried to comfort her, but without much success.

"It is so terrible," she kept repeating. "To be cut off without a moment's warning. You will pray for her, Sissy, won't you? She wronged you deeply, but—"

"Mary!" interrupted Sissy. "Do you imagine I can think of that now? Of course I will pray for her, poor soul! And if I, a faulty human creature, can forgive her, as I do from the bottom of my heart, can you not trust to the infinite mercy of God, who sees all and knows all, and can find excuses where we can not? To understand all is to pardon all."

Charlie, coming in, gave Mary a hearty kiss.

"Poor old Polly!" he said. "You must come over here whenever you feel inclined. Sissy and I will always be glad to see you."

"Thank you, Charlie," said Mary gratefully.

She availed herself very often of the invitation in the days that followed. It was dreary at Langton. Philip only appeared at meals. The rest of the time he was shut up in his study, where nobody dared disturb him, excepting his little daughter. Mary would have liked to bring Dolly with her on her visits to Wharton, but she did not dare, and Sissy did not suggest it. She was never quite certain how much Charlie would stand.

Mary was spending the afternoon at Wharton when Margaret came in unexpectedly. She had met Charlie in Carnston, and he had persuaded her to come up to tea. Mary admired Margaret greatly, but stood somewhat in awe of her; for, with all her sweetness, she was rather unapproachable, except where her own friends were concerned. Tea was brought in, a regular North Country tea, with cakes and scones, and a kind of oatcake, a local delicacy, which Sissy patronized, in order, as she said, laughing, to encourage home production.

"I always enjoy the Wharton scones,"

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said Margaret. "They are the best I know."

"Yes, they are good," said Charlie, helping himself to another.

"Charlie's appetite never fails," remarked Sissy. "I should know he was seriously ill if he couldn't eat."

She spoke lightly, but her face was flushed, and she seemed preoccupied. Margaret looked at her anxiously. Sissy had not been herself lately; and, whether by accident or design, she had not been able to see her alone and make inquiries.

Tea over, Margaret rose and said she must catch her train. Charlie offered his escort to the station, which lay at the bottom of the hill, just beyond the confines of the estate.

"I see nothing of Sissy now," said Margaret as they descended the path. "Your cousin is always there."

"Poor old Polly! Don't you like her, Mrs. Fraser?" asked Charlie. "She is a real good sort. It is lonely for her at Langton. Leigh sits and glooms all day, and the

child is too young to be a companion."

"But I miss Sissy, all the same."

"Can't I take her place?" inquired Charlie boldly.

Margaret laughed.

"You! you foolish boy"—she began, but Charlie suddenly flared up.

"Boy!" he exclaimed. "I am sick of being called a boy. I wish you could begin to realize that I am a man."

Margaret looked at him in pained surprise. In a moment he was at her feet.

"Oh, Mrs. Fraser, dearest Mrs. Fraser, forgive me! I love you so devotedly."

"Get up, Charlie," said Margaret, greatly agitated. "This is no attitude from you to me."

He obeyed.

"I am very, very sorry," she repeated. "Is this my fault?"

"No, it is not your fault," cried Charlie impetuously. "How can you help being so desirable that no man can see you without loving you?"

"I have only thought of you as Sissy's brother—"

"Then, will you try to think of me as myself—a man who adores you, and would give his life for you?"

"Hush! Charlie," said Margaret. "You shock me."

"I know what you think—that I have forgotten the dear old Colonel. But I haven't. He would like me to take care of you and the boy."

"I can not understand," she sighed. "I am older than you—"

"I am twenty-five," said Charlie stubbornly.

"And I am twenty-eight—three years on the wrong side."

"What does that matter, if you can only care for me?"

"I do care for you—very much. You have been so kind to my boy, so good to me!"

"Good to you! Oh, Margaret!"
He could say no more.

"I can not bear to give you pain."

"Why should you?" he pleaded. "Look here, Margaret, I have taken you by surprise. I did not mean to speak to-day, but it rushed out. Will you think it over? It is not much to ask."

"I will, Charlie, but I am afraid it is no use."

"Try me," he urged. "Give me a chance. And, remember," earnestly, "it is not a boy's love I offer you, but a man's."

The station was in sight, and both felt the necessity of composing themselves before they met the eyes of strangers. Just before the train started, Charlie put his head in at the window.

"How long must I wait?" he asked.

"A week," she answered; and, as he would have protested, "no, I insist."

"It will be a very long week for me," he grumbled.

At twenty-eight a woman of Margaret's type is perhaps at her best. She had gained with every year that passed over her head in

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dignity and sweetness and tender womanliness, bringing to mind the words of the Cantic: "Thy eyes are dove's eyes, besides what is hid within." She was the very embodiment of the eternal type of womanhood that we associate with the pictures of Italian madonnas. Without an effort on her part she had captured Charlie's affections, and her serene unconsciousness only added to the attraction. But now that serenity was sorely troubled. Had she been to blame? Ought she to have seen what was coming? The idea of remarriage had not occurred to her, least of all in connection with Charlie. She was wrapped up in her boy, her one aim and object to bring him up a Christian and a gentleman, as the Colonel had said. But the thought once admitted, it was difficult to shut it out. After all, she was still young, and the greater part of her life lay before her. It was absurd to think of it as ended, or as a mere shadowy existence merged in the lives of others. To be Sissy's sister was a great

temptation. The tie between them was unusually strong. Sissy had stood by her at a crisis in her life, and she would never forget it. No one else could ever be quite the same to her. But she knew how easily we drift apart in life from those we love best, how circumstances divide, and feelings change. This would give force and solidity to their friendship; it would be a bond of union difficult to break. So she passed the week thinking, wondering; all the time growing more accustomed to the idea. But she must see Sissy before deciding.

"I want to talk to you," she wrote. "Will you come over to dine and sleep? I wish to ask your advice."

Sissy handed the note to her brother at breakfast. He flushed a little as he read it.

"Do what you can for me, Sis," he said. "She wants to consult you."

"If it depends on me," said Sissy, "your cause is won."

And so it proved. Margaret could not

resist Sissy's arguments, but she must have time to readjust her ideas, to consider Charlie under this new aspect.

"You are not vexed with me, Sissy, for taking him from you?"

"Margaret dearest! I shall bless you for making him happy."

"I can not bear the thought of taking your place at the Hall, where you have been mistress so long," sighed Margaret. "But the war will soon be over, and Major Maxwell will be coming back to claim you."

"Don't, Margaret," cried Sissy desperately, turning away. "I can not bear to think of that."

"Sissy!" exclaimed Margaret aghast. "You are not going to disappoint him when he has been so faithful to you?"

"He should have come home sooner. He has waited too long. Oh, I know I am horrid to say this—you can not blame me more than I blame myself. But things have happened."

Margaret understood.

"Mary has been telling me about Philip," began Sissy.

The best of us are not perfect. A twinge of jealousy shot across Margaret's breast. So this was the secret of Sissy's sudden friendship for her cousin. Poor Mary had not found favor in Margaret's eyes, and now she was ready to condemn her for encouraging Sissy in feelings which could only be productive of pain.

"Margaret," said Sissy with an effort, "I am very unhappy."

And at the words, Margaret forgot Mary, forgot everything but Sissy who needed comfort.

"Tell me all about it, my poor darling," she said, putting her arm round her, and drawing her close to her side.

"I can not help thinking of him, sitting alone, eating his heart out. Oh! I know he doesn't want me—nobody wants me," ungratefully, "except those I don't want. But I said I would be a friend to him when his mother died. I can not be forced, Mar-

garet. Bernard is a man. He can take care of himself."

"You shall not be forced."

"And Charlie must not scold me," feverishly. "I can not bear it."

Poor Sissy! the strain was too much for her. It was not like her to think of herself, but the effort to be true to Maxwell, when her heart was breaking for the man she had tried so hard to forget, was beyond her strength. It advanced Charlie's cause as nothing else could have done. Margaret felt that, as his wife, she could protect and defend Sissy, could shield her from Charlie's roughness, and his manlike want of comprehension. When Sissy went back the next morning she carried with her the assurance that Margaret's dispositions were favorable.

"But you can not expect her to fall into your mouth, like a ripe cherry," she cautioned her brother. "She is a Christian woman, not a Turk. She must be wooed and won."

So Charlie began his courtship, and made

steady progress in his lady's favor. In his absorption he failed to notice how ill Sissy was looking, but Margaret saw it, and spoke to him about it.

"I can't think why," he said. "She has everything to make her happy."

The blindness of men! Margaret did not enlighten him. Only she begged him to be gentle with her, and he promised to obey. One day when he was urging his suit he had a happy inspiration.

"Let us put it to the boy," he said, and called little Cecil, who was playing in the adjoining room with a magnificent model train that Sissy had given him on his last birthday.

"Come here, my son," and he placed him between his knees. He was a fine, sturdy little fellow, just four years old. "How would you like to live at Wharton always?"

"With you and Aunt Sissy? Oh, it would be lovely—if mummy would come, too."

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"That is just what I am trying to persuade her."

"Oh, mummy, do!" exclaimed the child, climbing on her knee, and putting his soft little cheek against hers. "I should have such a nice, big playroom. And I could have rabbits there—couldn't I, Uncle Charlie?"

"Rabbits, and a pony, and anything else you like. Only I couldn't allow you to call me Uncle Charlie."

"What should I call you then?" asked the child, puzzled.

"Daddy," he answered; and, meeting Margaret's eyes: "Indeed, I would be a true father to him, Margaret, I swear to you."

A few weeks later the wedding took place in the village church. Margaret was married in a traveling dress, but a large number of neighbors assembled, and Sissy did the honors very prettily at the wedding-breakfast, which was held at Wharton Hall. Then the bride and bridegroom left for the

Continent, and Sissy took her little godson to a seaside place in the south of England, where he played all day long on the sands and enjoyed himself to his heart's content. They stayed at a nice hotel, and Sissy used to lie awake at night listening to the waves, which seemed to harmonize with her restless mood.

Life was very hard on her just then. She was at a loose end, necessary to nobody, as she had said herself. Charlie and Margaret were happy together. For the moment she was of use taking charge of the boy; but, after all, a nurse could have done as much. When the thought of Maxwell obtruded itself, she turned away from it impatiently. He had telegraphed his congratulations on Charlie's marriage. She had not answered his last letter. She did not know what to say. To write as she felt would hurt his feelings, and she could not be a hypocrite. What the end of it all was to be she could not see.

She came back to Wharton just in time

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to welcome the newly married couple on their return. Even on her honeymoon Margaret had not been able to refrain from thinking of Sissy. Charlie looked thoroughly happy, but there is always one who loves and another who is loved, and I am afraid this was the case with him and Margaret. Perhaps it was her fate to be worshiped. She had been adored and placed on a pedestal by both her husbands. The depths of her heart had only once been sounded, and then it had nearly cost her her life. It had left her with a horror and dread of any strong emotion.

With Margaret's return, Sissy's household duties came to an end. There could not be two mistresses in a house, she told her sister-in-law, and Margaret was wise enough to see it. But time hung heavy on Sissy's hands with the loss of her wonted occupations, and she sometimes wondered what she was going to do with her life. One thing she was determined—that she would not be persuaded into a loveless marriage.

CHAPTER XIX

IN SPITE OF ALL

SISSY had just come in from church on Sunday. Margaret and Charlie were following her. She was taking off her hat in front of the glass when a servant knocked at the door.

"If you please, ma'am, Sir Philip Leigh is in the drawing-room, and would like to speak to you."

"Say I will be down in a minute," answered Sissy, wondering.

It must be something urgent that could bring Philip to Charlie's house. She hastened downstairs fearing an encounter between the two men. Charlie would not be rude, of course, but she would rather they did not meet. Philip came forward at her entrance, looking pale and anxious.

"I have come to ask a favor, Sissy," he began. "My little girl is very ill. She does nothing but cry for you. Will you come to her? The doctor says that her life may depend on her wish being gratified."

"Of course I will, Philip."

"I brought the dog-cart. I thought perhaps you would drive back with me."

"I will put on my things at once. But I must leave a message for my sister-in-law."

She rang the bell, and told the servant to inform Margaret when she came in what had happened, then hastened up to her room. Nana was putting away her things.

"I am going out again, Nana. No, you need not wait."

She was just tying on her veil when she heard a step outside, a hasty knock, and, without waiting for an answer, Charlie burst into the room.

"Sissy, what is this I hear? You are not thinking of going?"

"Indeed I am."

"What! to Leigh's house? After all that

has happened? Have you thought what people will say?"

"What does that matter if I can do any good?"

"Then I care for you. If you won't listen to me, I will speak to Leigh."

He turned to the door. Sissy threw herself in his way.

"Charlie," she pleaded, "be reasonable. The child is ill. It is a matter of life and death. How can I refuse?"

"I don't believe it. And—even if it were true—suppose she refuses to let you go?"

"Then I shall stay, of course."

"Alone with Leigh! You are mad."

"What nonsense, Charlie. Mary is there."

"Mary!"

He was staggered for a moment.

"It is true," he owned reluctantly. "I had forgotten that. All the same, Sissy, I strongly disapprove."

"I am sorry, Charlie, but I must judge for myself."

She picked up her gloves, and left him to relieve his mind to Margaret who, however, took Sissy's part.

"I don't see what else she could do, Charlie, if the child is so ill."

"*His* child," growled Charlie, "and Eleanor's. Confound him! Why can't he leave her alone?"

It seemed like a dream to Sissy to be driving once more to Langton by Philip's side, as she had so often done in days gone by. What a gulf lay between the present and the past! And yet, in spite of herself, the clouds which had overshadowed her so long lifted a little. Philip drove well, and there was a certain exhilaration in being driven quickly through the air behind a fast trotting horse. He spoke very little during the eight miles' drive, and she studied him furtively under the shadow of her hat. Poor Philip, how changed he was! What lines of care and trouble in his face! It was not wrong to think of him now, that was one comfort. There was no struggle between

her conscience and her heart, as there had been before.

Dolly welcomed her with feeble delight. One of those feverish maladies to which excitable children are prone had threatened to wreck the delicate little brain. Sissy's image had taken possession of her mind. Ever since the day when Sissy had brought her home, she had never ceased to talk of her. When her illness came on, she tossed from side to side, crying out for her "pretty lady" to come and make her well. Philip tried in vain to soothe her; she grew so feverish at being contradicted that the doctor told him he would not answer for the consequences if her wish was refused.

As Charlie had foreseen, she refused to let Sissy go. She grew restless directly the subject was mentioned, and a groom was despatched to Wharton to bring back Sissy's things and her maid. She sat holding the hot little hand until Dolly fell into a peaceful sleep. The doctor came in the afternoon, and found a marked improvement.

“But she must be kept very quiet,” he insisted. “Only one person must be in the room at a time. And Miss Wharton must stay. The delirium might come on again at any moment.”

There was no help for it—even Charlie would have owned as much. The child clung to her, and could with difficulty be persuaded to let her out of her sight when Mary relieved her for intervals of rest. She saw little of Philip, for her time was taken up with the child, but the knowledge that he was there, under the same roof, sent a strange excitement through her veins. He waylaid her one morning after breakfast, and thanked her earnestly.

“I haven’t deserved this of you, Sissy,” he said. “Your brother is right.”

“Why, has he spoken to you?” asked Sissy breathlessly.

“No, but he makes no secret of his opinion. Others have told me.”

Mary probably, thought Sissy, knowing Mary’s outspokenness and want of tact.

Children recover as quickly as they fall ill; and, the fever-storm once over, Dolly was soon herself again. But when Sissy spoke of her departure she burst into tears. Sissy was much perplexed. She could not stay on indefinitely, but it seemed cruel to leave the poor little thing who had taken such a curious fancy to her. She wrote to Margaret, and asked if she might bring her back with her to Wharton for a few days' visit. It would do her so much good to have a child of her own age to play with. Margaret persuaded Charlie to consent, much against his will. Dolly could hardly contain herself with delight. To go on a visit, like a grown-up young lady—she who had never been away from home before! She drove off by Sissy's side, full of importance and dignity, but when she arrived at the strange house she turned a little shy. Margaret took her into the nursery, and left her with Cecil. They looked at each other strangely at first, but tea loosened their tongues, and soon afterward they were running about to-

gether, Dolly's fair hair fluttering in the wind, and Cecil full of attentions for his little visitor. She was soon quite at home with all, but showed a marked preference for Charlie, as children so often do for men. Perhaps it was partly his likeness to Sissy. Irrate as he was against the father, he could not hold out against the innocent child; and, diverted by her dignified airs, he treated her with much deference, calling her "Miss Leigh," to her intense delight. At the end of a week Philip came to fetch her home, but she begged to be allowed to remain.

"I am sure Captain and Mrs. Wharton do not mind my staying. Do you?" appealing to Charlie.

"On the contrary."

"There, you see. Do let me, daddy. It is so dull at home."

"And what am I to do all alone, Dolly?"

"Why don't you stay here, too?"

It was an awkward question. Philip's confusion was reflected in Sissy's face. Margaret came to the rescue.

“Let her stay another week, Sir Philip. She is no trouble, I assure you, and my little boy loves to have her.”

So Dolly remained, and when she went home a few days later it was with the promise of future meetings. Peace was outwardly restored between the two houses. Charlie's manner to Philip when they met was chilly in the extreme, and Margaret had never got over her first feeling against Mary, though she did her best to be cordial to her for Sissy's sake. But there was no open breach, and intercourse was possible.

Maxwell, seriously uneasy at hearing nothing from Sissy, had written to Margaret.

“She has missed three mails,” he wrote. “Is anything wrong?”

And Margaret could only counsel patience.

“Sissy is not herself,” she wrote. “I am very anxious about her. She has had a great shock, and has not got over it. The tragedy of Eleanor Leigh's death made a

deep impression on her. I wish I could take her abroad for a thorough change, but I doubt if she would go, and Charlie does not want to give up his hunting, though he would do so for Sissy's sake. But they are not very good friends just now, I am sorry to say. You know how people who love each other deeply can hurt each other. He is impatient with her, and she resents it—she who used to be so sweet and forgiving. I sometimes ask myself if I have come between them. I hope not. I would do anything to make Sissy happy. But I think it lies deeper.”

It was Charlie's pride that made him so hard on Sissy. He saw further than Margaret gave him credit for, and Sissy knew it. The twins had an instinctive perception of each other's moods. Margaret's letter was not calculated to allay Maxwell's anxiety, but she thought it was only right to give him a hint how things were tending. It would soften the blow in the end. For she was under no illusions as to Sissy's feelings.

One morning Philip rode over to Whar-ton, and asked Sissy to be his wife. Mary Roche was engaged to be married. On her last visit to her native country she had come across a delightful young Irishman, who had had the sense to look below the surface. He was not then in a position to marry, but they had corresponded ever since; and, now that he had got the appointment he had been hoping for, he wrote at once to ask her to share his future.

"I have little to offer you, Sissy," said the man who had once been her devoted lover. "I am a broken man, and my best days are over. But if you will take pity on me, for the child's sake. You are fond of Dolly."

Sissy listened and wondered. How different was this from his first proposal! The wish of her heart was granted to her. Had it come too late? Was this all he could find to say to her who had loved him so deeply and unselfishly when he had trampled on her affections and almost broken her heart? And Maxwell, who had waited for her so

patiently, and whom she had used so ill—what right had she to listen to Philip, who was so immeasurably his inferior, who came to her now because he wanted a mistress for his house and a mother for his child? And yet, in spite of all, her heart was his, and when his call came, indifferent, almost cold as it was, she had no choice but to obey. She placed her hand in his.

“For the child’s sake and for your sake, Philip, I will do my best.”

It was a strange betrothal. There had been no word of love on either side. Perhaps Philip felt this; for, stooping down hastily, he kissed her.

“I am utterly unworthy of you, Sissy,” he said, “but I will try to make you happy.”

Her sore heart was a little comforted.

Charlie was furious. That his sister should cheapen herself in this way, pick up the glove directly it was thrown to her! And what about Maxwell, whom she had tacitly agreed to marry? Margaret tried in vain to soften his indignation.

"You mustn't be angry with her, Charlie."

"But I am—very angry, Margaret."

"Remember," she pleaded, "there was no engagement."

"What does that matter? It was just as good. I call that a quibble. She has corresponded with him for nearly three years. Poor old Maxwell—to serve him such a scurvy trick at the last! I am ashamed of Sissy. And after the way Leigh has treated her!"

"She can not help it," said Margaret. "She loves him. A woman will forgive anything to her first love."

"Well, all I can say is I wish to wash my hands of her. She will live to repent it—you mark my words."

For some days he refused to speak to her—but when she came to him, and putting her arms round his neck, kissed him and wept, and implored him not to be vexed with her, he could not hold out. She was his only sister, and he loved her.

"You won't be happy, my poor girl," he told her.

"I don't expect to be very happy, Charlie," she answered. "But I shall be less unhappy with him than with any one else."

She had written to Maxwell a short little note, to tell him of her engagement.

"Forgive me—he needs me so much. You are strong, you can stand alone."

To this she received no answer. She could not expect one. She had sinned against him past forgiveness.

They were married very quietly not long afterward. Charlie gave her away, much against his will—but he and Sissy had buried their differences, and he was going to see her through. She wore a simple white dress and a veil which had belonged to her mother. It was with a curious sense of unreality that she stood by Philip's side and plighted him the troth which she had vowed him in her heart so long ago. It was only six years, after all, but it seemed a lifetime. The promise of her youth had come true at last,

but with what a difference! Everything comes to him who waits, but the bloom of the fruit had gone off in the waiting. This was not the Philip of her girlish dreams, this weary, disappointed man who did not even pretend to give her more than the burnt-out ashes of a heart wasted by his passion for another woman. Yet he was a young man still, not thirty-five. Tears came into Sissy's eyes, but she forced them back. Such as he was, she would not have exchanged him for any one else. He needed her, and if she could bring any measure of peace and happiness into his shattered life it would not have been all in vain.

CHAPTER XX

THE END OF THE CHAPTER

SISSY began her married life with a definite aim and object—to rouse Philip from the lethargy into which he had sunk since Eleanor's death. She tempted him out of the study, where he had been wont to spend so many dreary hours, and persuaded him to take an interest in the management of the estate. The land which had come to him free and unencumbered had been mortgaged, to meet the demands of Eleanor's extravagances; but Sissy hoped that, with economy and wise administration, that might be set right. Her own money, of course, was settled on herself, but her first act was to hand over the income to Philip. She could not bear to hold anything independently of him.

In spite of Charlie's prophecy, she was not unhappy. Her life was too full for that.

Little Dolly adored her and followed her everywhere, and day by day she became more necessary to her husband. Charlie grew reconciled to the marriage as time went on. He was pleased to see his sister take a leading position in the county, and it was nice to have her settled so near. The new Lady Leigh won golden opinions from all. People came to call as they never did in Eleanor's time, when the house was filled with guests they did not care to meet—much more amusing, Eleanor declared, than the country frumps.

Some wondered that Eleanor's portrait still hung over the mantelpiece in the dining-room, but Sissy was incapable of such petty revenge as the removal of her rival's picture. Yet it hurt her to see that flaunting beauty facing her, and to perceive Philip's eyes wandering to it when he thought she was not looking. But all her life Sissy had faced things, and lived them down. The Scarlet Lady remained in her garret. Like Eleanor, Sissy had no fear of the old superstition,

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but for a nobler reason. There were higher and holier influences at work in the house now, and she was not afraid.

One thing troubled Sissy with growing anxiety, and that was her husband's health. He was much too thin and had a curious, hollow cough. But he was impatient when questioned, and refused to see the doctor. It was absurd, he said, for a trifle like that—he was all right. But she noticed that any extra exertion tired him, and that he got breathless when he walked up a hill. The Leighs were not a strong family, she knew, and Philip's father had died of consumption at an early age, but Philip himself had never shown any signs of delicacy until now.

A little heir to Wharton was born in September. There were great rejoicings. Charlie was a proud and happy father, and felt that his cup of earthly happiness was full. He had nothing left to wish for. Cecil was much pleased with his baby brother. He looked upon him rather in the light of a new plaything, and Margaret had

to explain that he must be very gentle with him.

"It will be a long time before he will be able to go out with dad and me, won't it, mummy?" he asked.

"A very long time, my darling," she answered, and wondered if childish jealousy had prompted the question. But Charlie had amply redeemed his promise to be a father to her boy, and the two were the best of friends.

Sissy came over to spend the day with her sister-in-law. She looked rather worried, and confided to Margaret her fears with regard to Philip.

"I don't like it, Margaret," she said. "I can not get him to see a doctor. And he does such imprudent things. I dare not leave him even for a night, or I would have come to you, Margaret dear."

"I quite understand," answered Margaret. "But I think you are over-anxious. He looks all right to me—much better than he did when you married him."

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“Ah! You see him at his best,” sighed Sissy. “I will get Dr. Giles to come and dine, and take a look at him.”

But when the doctor came he was rather reassuring. Of course he could not tell, without thoroughly overhauling him, and that Philip would not permit. But he was looking well that night, and did not cough while the doctor was there. Dr. Giles complimented Sissy on the improvement she had worked in him. She took heart again. He certainly looked much happier. He liked her company, and it was always his for the asking. She rode and drove with him, and they were seldom seen apart. People remarked how devoted the second Lady Leigh was to her husband, so different from the first. They dined at Wharton two or three times. Charlie was much more cordial in his manner to his brother-in-law, and there was nothing to find fault with in the manner of the two men to each other. This was a great relief to Sissy, who had feared they would never be friends. Driving home after din-

ner with her husband beside her, she ventured to indulge a trembling hope that brighter days were in store for them both.

But this was St. Martin's summer. The winter, alas! was at hand.

Margaret had begun to come down to breakfast again, much to Charlie's satisfaction. He liked to see her sitting opposite him in her pretty morning-gown, while he read his paper and told her the news.

"A letter for you from Sissy," he remarked.

"I thought I should have seen her yesterday," remarked Margaret, opening it. Then she uttered an exclamation.

"What is it? Anything wrong?"

"Philip has broken a blood vessel. He is ordered to Davos immediately. She wants to know if we will take charge of Dolly."

"Of course. Poor Sissy! Is she very much upset?"

"I think so, but she doesn't say much," handing him the letter. "Charlie, you must

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go over at once." She would have liked to go herself, but he had the prior claim.

"Tell her I will come over this afternoon," she called out as he rode away.

He found Sissy in the midst of preparations, very pale, but calm and composed. She had telegraphed to the hotel at Davos for rooms, and written to engage a courier who had been recommended to her by one of her friends a short time before. She had never been abroad herself, and it was important that the journey should be made easy for Philip.

"How did it happen?" asked Charlie.

"Quite suddenly. I sent for the doctor at once. We managed to stop the bleeding at last, and then Dr. Giles thoroughly examined him. He says there has been mischief for some time past, but by taking steps at once it may be cured."

"How is he now?"

"Better, but he must be kept very quiet. The sight of the blood was very alarming."

Her voice shook a little as she spoke. A

hush seemed to have fallen on the house with the alarming illness of its master. The servants moved quietly about, and spoke in lowered tones. Little Dolly looked scared, and Charlie suggested that Margaret ought to take her back to Wharton when she came that afternoon.

“She will be out of your way, and you will have quite enough to think about.”

Sissy gratefully accepted.

Three days later they were on their way abroad, in that sad pursuit of health which often seems only to prolong the agony. At first Philip got much better; he lost his cough and began to put on flesh. Then his nerves went wrong, and Sissy had a trying time for some weeks. Then—but why dwell on the fluctuations of this terrible malady, with its hopes and fears? Through it all they drew very near together. His old love for her came back, chastened by the thought of the parting which both saw lay before them. News reached Wharton at fitful intervals, when Sissy felt able to write. At last came

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a telegram to Charlie begging him to come to her—it was more than she could cope with alone. He started at once, traveling night and day, but when he reached Davos all was over. He found Sissy prostrate. That last week of nursing had exhausted her remaining strength, and, the strain ended, she collapsed entirely. He brought her back to Wharton by slow and easy stages, the shadow of her former self. It was a crushed and broken Sissy he put into Margaret's arms, to be kissed and cried over, and tenderly nursed back to health. Once she said, with a shudder: "Oh, Margaret, that terrible delirium! Thank God! there was peace at last."

But, except for this, she never told any one what she had gone through during those weeks of suffering. They had brought their reward. Before he died he kissed and blessed her, and told her God had sent her to be his comfort. He went down into the dark valley with his hand in hers and her name on his lips.

She stayed with them three months while Charlie looked after her affairs and settled everything. The new owner of Langton was out in India with his regiment, but he wrote asking Sissy to make it her home as long as she liked, and said she would be conferring a favor on him by doing so. But she could not bear to go back there—it was too full of associations—yet she could not stay indefinitely as a guest even with those she loved best. She felt she must have some place of her own. So she took the little house at Granby which Margaret had rented during her widowhood, and where she would be close at hand. Here she remained during the summer months, gradually regaining her looks and health, but with a heart that seemed deadened to everything but the memories of the past.

CHAPTER XXI

MAXWELL'S RETURN

MATTERS had reached this stage when Maxwell returned from South Africa. The regiment had been kept out there after the war to help to settle the country. He was Colonel Maxwell now—V. C., C. B.—in command of the regiment, with a splendid record behind him. His first visit was to Wharton, where he was received with open arms.

“It seems like old times to have you back again, old man,” said Charlie heartily.

“Old times—with a difference,” answered Maxwell, smiling. “How do you like being monarch of all you survey?”

“I don’t dislike it,” Charlie owned.

The heir of Wharton was brought in and duly admired. Cecil regarded the visitor with much interest, and asked what he had

done with his sword. He was much disappointed to hear it had been left in London.

"I had to get it sharpened," said Maxwell gravely.

Cecil's face lighted up.

"After killing the Boers?" he inquired eagerly.

Maxwell nodded.

"Daddy says," pursued the boy, "that you've got a cross, which is more than any gold can buy. May I see it?"

He was a little disappointed when he saw the plain metal trophy, but Margaret, calling him to her, showed him the words *For Valor* engraved on it, and explained their meaning. He looked at Maxwell with increased respect.

"When I grow up," he said, "I'll have a cross like that."

"I hope you will, old chap," said his stepfather.

The two men had much to talk about that evening. They discussed the later events of the war, and Charlie asked after his old

comrades—many of them, alas! no longer in the land of the living—while Margaret listened and put in a word or two now and then.

“Do you never regret the Army?” asked Maxwell.

“Sometimes, but I should never have been much good with this arm of mine. There is plenty to do here, though you might not think it. And now that I am a family man,” exchanging a glance with his wife, which Maxwell intercepted.

“You are a lucky fellow!” he exclaimed. “What has he done, Mrs. Wharton, to deserve it?”

He checked a sigh. Margaret guessed what was in his mind.

“You haven’t asked after Sissy,” said Charlie at length.

“I hope Lady Leigh is well,” said Maxwell formally.

Charlie stared at him in amazement.

“Why, Maxwell,” he blurted out, “don’t you care for Sissy any more?”

It was so characteristic of Charlie that Maxwell could not help laughing.

"My dear fellow," he said, "do you suppose she wants me to? She took an effectual means of curing me, you must confess."

But Charlie was bitterly disappointed.

"I always hoped she would end up with Maxwell," he confided to his wife when they were alone.

"So she will," answered Margaret consolingly. "His pride has been cruelly hurt, but he loves her still. Let me talk to him."

The next day she took him out for a long walk and told him all that Sissy had gone through—her sorrow, her agony of mind, the overtaxing of nerves and strength in those long months of sorrow and anxiety.

"If you saw her now, you would be sorry for her."

She pleaded for her with all a woman's persuasive power; and Maxwell, at the bottom of his heart, was only too ready to be convinced.

"Have you ever thought," said Margaret, "of what she has undergone? You have much to forgive, but she had more. You have suffered, but what was your suffering compared to hers? Poor Philip! he is dead, and I would not say anything against him, but if you think her life was easy with him you are very wrong. Oh!" exclaimed Margaret, "when I think of it all, I reverence Sissy."

Maxwell listened, more moved than he would allow.

"That is all very well, Mrs. Wharton," he said at last. "I see it from her point of view, and I forgive her, though I once thought I never could. She dealt me the cruelest blow a man could receive. But, in what you are telling me, I don't see where I come in."

"You care for her still," said Margaret softly.

"I shall always take an interest in her welfare."

"Is that all? But I know it is not. Ask

Charlie's advice. Men understand one another."

And that night after dinner, over their cigars, Maxwell broached the subject.

"Your wife has been talking to me," he began.

Charlie looked up.

"About Sissy? Look here, Maxwell, I don't want to throw my sister at any man's head. If your feelings have changed, say so. But, if not—"

"If not, what, Charlie?" asked Maxwell rather eagerly, as the other paused.

"I should say go in and win. The coast is clear. As long as poor Leigh was anywhere round, you hadn't a chance. She would always have been hankering after him. But, now's he gone, she can't mourn him forever. That chapter of her life is closed."

Maxwell smiled at Charlie's homely wisdom, but he shook his head.

"I must have something more to go upon," he said. "She threw me over. How do I know she would care to see me?"

"I'll write and ask her," said Charlie, with alacrity.

By return of post came the answer.

"I shall be very glad to see Colonel Maxwell, if he cares to come."

Colonel Maxwell! This was putting things on a new footing. But perhaps she was wise, thought Maxwell. It would be less embarrassing. A day or two elapsed before he availed himself of the invitation. It would not do to appear too eager. Margaret's words had prepared him to find Sissy changed, but when he was ushered into the drawing-room, and she came forward to welcome him, he could not repress a start. Was this the Sissy of his recollection—this pale, sad-eyed woman with her languid step and the sorrowful droop of her mouth? Not that she had lost her looks; her face had a pathetic, arresting beauty that compelled the beholder's attention, but grief wrapped her round, like a garment, and set her apart. A wave of compassion swept over him. Resentment faded away.

"It was kind of you to come," she said; and he was struck afresh by the sound of her voice. It had lost its vibrant tone, was flat and deadened, attuned to the atmosphere of a sick-room. "Dolly, darling, go and ask them to give us tea."

The child flew to obey, and returning sat down on a low stool by Sissy's side and nestled close to her.

"This is my little daughter," said Sissy fondly. "Dolly, shake hands with Colonel Maxwell."

Philip's child! It seemed to place an immeasurable distance between him and Sissy—would he ever be able to cross it?

Sissy had gone through too much to feel awkward. They were soon talking, like ordinary acquaintances, of Maxwell's journey home and the state of affairs in South Africa. By tacit consent they avoided deeper subjects, but each was taking stock of the other. Sissy regarded with growing respect and admiration the man beside her. He had come unscathed through great dan-

gers, and had acquired dignity and assurance. He moved and spoke like a man accustomed to command his fellow-men. And he, too, was finding out fresh qualities in Sissy, a broader outlook, the self-reliance of one who had had to decide for herself and for others. Her girlish sweetness had deepened into a nobility of character that he felt without being able to define. They had both looked death in the face since they last met—he for himself, she for the man she loved. The knowledge drew them together with a subtle sympathy, conscious though unexpressed.

When at last he rose to go, Sissy thanked him for coming.

“It has been a great pleasure,” she said simply.

“May I come again?” asked Maxwell.

“Whenever you like. I shall always be glad to see you.”

He availed himself of the permission, but sparingly, and Sissy grew to look forward to his visits. He treated her with a gentle-

ness very soothing to her bruised spirit. They were still "Colonel Maxwell" and "Lady Leigh" to each other, but beneath the formal terms a warm friendship for him was springing up on Sissy's side. What Maxwell's feelings were, he kept to himself.

They had long talks beside the sea in the beautiful evenings, when he unfolded to her his ambitions, and she listened with sympathy and interest. He was a keen and ardent soldier, centered in his profession. They were next on the roll for India, and he expected to be ordered out there the following year.

His leave came to an end, and he returned to his regiment. But he came up to Wharton for Christmas and knelt behind Sissy in the little chapel that was so familiar. They had that in common at least—on the deepest subject of all they felt alike. She greeted him as an old friend, and was glad to see him. At Whitsuntide he came again for a few days, in order to keep in touch with her. And then in the autumn came the expected

order to India, and he ran up to say good-by.

"Is it too soon to speak?" he asked Margaret.

"I don't know," she answered, "but I should try. She is coming over to-morrow to see you before you go."

Sissy arrived in the morning, and after luncheon Margaret discreetly left them alone. Maxwell did not speak; he was wondering how to broach the subject. It was Sissy who broke the silence.

"I am very sorry you are going," she said.

"It is hard to go," he replied, "but you can make it easy. Sissy, I once thought I could never speak of this again. Send me away now, and I will never trouble you any more. But if you can care for me, tell me."

"Bernard," she said, "have you forgiven me?"

"My dear," he answered, "I can not help myself. Whatever you did I should have to forgive you."

"I did you a great wrong."

"It is not too late to set it right."

She looked up, and in her eyes he read her surrender.

He was very gentle with her. Indeed, he could hardly believe that the prize he had coveted so long was at last within his grasp.

"You don't know," she told him, "how much I have suffered. At first I could only think of myself—and him—but, lately—you have been so good to me—"

She paused. He took her hand and kissed it.

"How soon must you go?" she asked him presently.

He told her.

"And then—when shall I see you again?"

"My dearest—I hardly dare to ask you—but will you come with me?"

"So soon! Oh, Bernard, I can not."

"Think," he pleaded, "how many years I have had to wait. I am afraid to lose sight of you. Who knows what may happen? You eluded me once."

In the end he prevailed. Before Charlie

and Margaret had time to recover from their astonishment at the rapidity of events, Sissy was married and on her way to India. Dolly remained at Wharton for the time being, but only until they had settled down. Sissy was quite determined that the child should not grow up apart from her. India was not what it was. They were going to a healthy station, and there were always the hills in summer.

Lady Leigh had no children, but Mrs. Maxwell has two beautiful boys, the pride of their father's heart. Dolly is devoted to them, and Sissy has never failed in affection for her little stepdaughter. She took her into her heart the day she found her crying by the roadside; and, from the day she married Philip, Dolly never knew what it was to miss a mother's love. She grew up very happily under the roof to which she had no natural claim. Maxwell was good to her, and if, in his inner consciousness, he was sometimes a little jealous of Sissy's fondness for the child of his dead rival, he was

too kind-hearted to show it. He reaped the reward of his years of devotion. Sissy gave him her whole heart, which she would never have done if things had fallen out otherwise. Yet she never forgot Philip, whose name was enshrined in her prayers. Alone with Dolly she often talked of him, and taught the little girl to cherish the memory of the father she had lost.

THE END

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